

The Crown by youjustgotlawyered

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Hawkins Lab - Character, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Will Byers

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Summary:

****DISCONTINUED--SORRY READERS****

Following the incident at the Byers' home, Billy and Steve decide to have a well-deserved night of heavy drinking in order to overcome their respective issues. Both of them get far more than they ever bargained for as their secrets are quickly revealed, forcing them to rely on each other, and figure out what the hell they're actually doing when Steve can't deal with his nightmares and Neil's latest beating leaves Billy and Max without a home.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Here you are, you bunch of vultures. *points*

Part 1

After Billy had failed to bring Maxine home, his father had let into him. Slapping wasn't even there. It had been punching and kicking. He had been somewhat careful to avoid Billy's face, laying most of his hits on his back and chest, but now Billy looked like absolute shit. Felt like absolute shit. Breathing hurt, so on the court the following school day, he was slower and less aggressive. He was on top of Harrington, as always, but he was careful to avoid getting too chummy with him. He didn't want to be elbowed or knocked over. With how much his body throbbed, he doubted that wouldn't happen eventually.

It didn't, and Billy was thankful for it. He kept on the court for just a bit after the others left and made his way into the locker room. He was still a mess of nerves and anger, fucking pissed that what had happened at the Byers house caused this. Fuck Harrington and fuck those goddamn nerds.

As soon as he got into the locker room, Billy ripped off his shirt. He felt confined in it, but he hadn't wanted the guys to see the large splotches of purple and blue all over his chest and back. He couldn't brush those off as sex escapades.

"Fuck," Billy hissed and shucked the rest of his clothing off. At least the showers should be empty at this point. Without picking up his clothes, because, why, he stalked to the shower room.

Steve had been quiet as he stood outside the showers, still, as soon as he heard the blonde stomping into the locker room. He couldn't help

but think that even his walk was menacing and aggressive. Ever since their encounter at the Byers' residence, Steve had been doing his best to avoid Billy, and more importantly avoid another beating.

Part of him wanted to believe it was a minor scuffle, that only his pride was bruised, but his face felt different about it.

Billy had been aggressive on the court, shooting Steve some glances he couldn't place very well, before nearly knocking him on his ass a few times. He had made damn sure to plant his feet this time, he wasn't sure his face could take another beating without getting his parents deeply involved, especially on school property.

Steve did his best to carefully open his locker, trying not to glance in the direction of the showers. Maybe if he just was quiet this would all be over soon, and luckily if it wasn't nobody was there to see him take another beating.

Unfortunately for Steve, Billy was really good at hearing noise. It was probably because he had to sit and listen for hints that his dad was home. He glanced back, frozen, and felt the need to grab his shirt. Instead, he took a towel and threw it around his waist. Fuck it. If someone sees the bruises, they'll just assume he got into a fight with someone. Maybe he won. Maybe he didn't. He didn't.

Billy walked forward until he caught sight of Harrington. His anger suddenly boiled and he sneered. "The fuck are you still doing here, Harrington? Looking for another throw?" He cocked his arm out so he could lean against the locker.

Compared to Harrington, Billy was *bulky*. He outweighed him, and in his opinion, out-fought him. The little shits had to resort to drugs to stop him, so what did Harrington have now? Absolutely fucking nothing.

Steve found himself sighing and tensing his muscles, preparing for a fight but absolutely not wishing for one. He just fucking knew it, fucking knew it. He steeled himself for a retort that was likely going to get his nose broken for real when he turned and saw Billy.

He had bruises all over his chest, stomach, and shoulders--Steve was

sure there were some on his back as well. They were clearly fresh, still marred a deep purple and blue and not even close to the sickly yellow and green just starting to form on Steve's face.

Part of him pitied whoever had gotten in a fight with Billy Hargrove because if Billy looked like that, then what the hell did the other guy look like?

His retort died on the tip of his tongue and Billy clearly caught him staring before he quickly mumbled, turning his gaze down and still holding onto a sweater in his hand. "Nothing man, I'm just finishing up."

Billy cocked an eyebrow and settled his hips against the locker. He watched him, scrutinizing the way Steve looked at him before smirking. "Like what you see, Harrington?" He mused, leaning forward so that their faces were too close for comfort. "Pretty boy have a hard on for something less than gal-like?" His words were scathing, and for a moment, he felt like his father. That was a kick in the gut. He scowled and pulled back, already disgusted with himself.

"From what I understand, losing the title meant losing the girl. Is that how it went? Are you just a fag, Harrington?" Billy scoffed and ran his fingers through his curly hair. The last few jabs had less venom in them, as if he was actually *tired* of taunting Harrington.

Steve frowned deeply at the comment, it wasn't as if he hadn't heard the word "fag" before, but the language still just offended some deep and quiet part of him. Nancy would likely claim it was due to his WASP sensibilities, but aside from clearly understanding somebody was different, he didn't think those sorts of names were necessary. He carefully avoided those words, even during playful banter amongst the team members--and typically felt a sort of acidic taste in his mouth when he didn't say anything. Lately he just avoided those discussions entirely and hadn't heard the word for a moment, and for some reason, in this moment, he couldn't stop himself from retorting.

"You really shouldn't say things like that. It's not..." What he wanted to say was nice, but who the fuck was he talking to? "It's not cool, man."

He leveled his gaze on Billy, and perhaps it was due this bruises that he forgot for one moment to very quickly defend that despite what he said, he was no way a “fag” himself.

Billy blinked. Really, he was surprised. He had expected a fight, a jab, a throwback, but this? It was like talking to someone’s parent. “Wow, sensitive, then?” He itched for a cigarette and glanced toward the showers. He needed one, but Harrington was there and it was so difficult to *not* harass the teen. When he glanced back, he caught Steve’s eyes and stared at him for a moment. Two moments A moment too long. Fuck. Whatever.

“So, let’s boil this down. You can’t fight. You don’t throw. Your body is...” He shrugged and smirked, as if *that* made it obvious. “And you can’t keep a whore around. Is that why you lost your title? Cause I’m curious, truly, I am. Explain this to me, since no one is here to interrupt you.”

Steve hadn’t been thinking, truly, when he shoved Billy as hard as he could against the locker room bench. He felt a small moment of satisfaction that he had caught him off guard, even if the big bastard hadn’t even come close to falling down.

“Don’t call her that!” Steve hissed, feeling his temper start to rise. He could ignore the jabs, but some things had to be off limits. Nancy and him may not have been dating anymore and he may have been resigned himself into a role he didn’t want, but he was well aware that Nancy hadn’t intended anything to happen. Sometimes in life things just happened. And he wasn’t about to listen to anybody talk shit about her, especially not Billy.

Billy stumbled back, almost tripping over the bench. He managed to catch himself and laughed. Ah, *there* he was. He looked up, his eyes flashing with joy as he pushed himself to his feet again. “She breaks up with you and you still defend her? What is this? You still in love, Harrington? Got the feels for her? How does Byers feel about that? He know?” He laughed again, but it turned dangerous without warning. Billy was up against Steve in seconds, shoving his back into the lockers hard enough to bruise. He sneered and made sure they were close enough that Steve could feel his breath against his cheek.

“You get all fighty for other people, but you can’t defend yourself? Why is that, pretty boy?” Billy was actually, genuinely curious. He was always out for himself (who was ever out for him, anyway?). Hell, if someone went after Tommy or his gal, he wouldn’t give two shits. That was their problem, so why does Harrington care so much about other people?

When Steve’s back hit the locker, he winced, briefly closing his eyes and his first thought was, ‘Fuck, not my face again, please.’ The last thing he wanted was to explain another beating to any of the kids, especially Dustin. His breath left him for a moment and then he held it, feeling Billy’s breath fan over his face, still faintly smelling of nicotine and some sort of mint that surprised Steve.

He knew that he could defend himself, with how bruised the guy was another good hit would really fucking hurt, but he had started this and kept his hands to his side even as he clenched his fists. His heart was racing as he opened his eyes, looking at Billy’s searching gaze. It made him extremely uncomfortable for so many reasons he couldn’t fathom.

“Because asshole, some of us have people that actually care about us!” And what the fuck was wrong with him, he regretted it as soon as he said, not just because it was cruel but also because fuck he really couldn’t take another beating.

Billy had been close enough that he could breathe in Steve’s scent--his deodorant, cologne, whatever the fuck he wore. It was enough to make his stomach clench. The fact that his dad thought bringing him here would “cure” him almost made him laugh. Boys were boys. Dicks were dicks, and he *liked them*. He glanced over Steve’s face and then froze at the comment.

The fresh bruises pulsed and Neil’s words were suddenly in his head again. He ground his teeth and shoved himself off of Steve. “Yeah, sure. She cares so much that she dumped you for another, creepier dude.” His words felt empty, though, *sounded empty*, and he hated himself for it. Fuck this. He shot Steve a nasty look, his hands clenched, before he started to make his way toward the shower. Honestly, he would have rather gotten punched than told something like that. It was almost like Neil had spoken out of Harrington’s

mouth, and wasn't that a fucking mood killer.

Steve didn't even realize he'd still been holding his breath until Billy released him, pulled away and for a moment Steve felt a lack of warmth he hadn't even realized was there for a second. He watched Billy warily as he turned, bruises all over his back. The sight of them turned his stomach and he wondered again about the other guy Billy had been fighting, he certainly hadn't caused them. He was sure his punch at the Byers' house had been the equivalent of swatting a fly for Billy.

For some reason though he lingered for a moment, he told himself he was preparing for the inevitable beating his mouth had bought him, but when Billy was a comfortable distance away, he found himself lingering there. And then he felt like shit.

Billy had just managed to bait him into yet another thing he was going to regret, eerily reminiscent of Nancy's slur at the movie theatre. He knew it was an immediate mistake and now it was done and anxiety churned in his stomach. He stood there, fidgeting, as he watched Billy.

Billy yanked the towel away from his waist and threw it to the side. He looked over his shoulder and grinned menacingly at Harrington. "You're staring. Not really helping the 'I'm not a fag' argument there." He laughed and stepped into the showers. Once he did, he let his expression fall and he snarled to himself. Man, fuck Harrington. Of course the rich kid had people who cared. He ran his fingers through his hair, shoving it out of his eyes, and then he flicked the shower on. He let it stay wherever it landed--ice cold. He could manage that.

When Billy slid under the water, he grit his teeth. The bruises sang to life and reminded him that he would definitely need to get Maxine home and perhaps board up the window in her room so this shit wouldn't happen again. He clenched his jaw again and then released a harsh breath.

Steve made no comment at the new "fag" remark, it had landed him in hot water already. He quickly looked away when Billy yanked off his towel, showering with the guy was one thing but he was clearly

just standing there, and that unspoken rule regarding looking in the showers had been long hammered into Steve's head. And yet, he did make a small glance, he tried (he really did) to simply look at Billy's head, waiting for another remark. But his gaze inevitably drifted down his broad shoulders, sculpted and bruised, down to his ass, and down thick, muscular thighs.

It wasn't fair really. Billy was built like a goddamn statute straight out of an art history book. Deep down Steve knew that he wasn't slumpy, but there was a far cry between what he was and what Billy was. He kept his gaze trained to the floor, but stood his ground, his sweater still on the floor.

Billy could hear Steve's shuffling. He hated how in tune he was with his surroundings, but with his dad's fits, he had to be. He turned his head to the side and opened his eyes. Droplets of water were scathing over his face, dripping from his eyelashes, and he didn't even bother blinking as he caught Harrington's eyes. Instead of flicking him off or snarling, he licked his lips--slow and easy like. As he did, he let his eyes roam over Harrington. He did it to make him uncomfortable, to make him *stop looking*, but he had to admit, Harrington was easy to look at.

Of course, Harrington was a pussy, so what was he going to do? Run? Sputter? Glare? He chuckled and tipped his head back further, letting the water slide over his throat and chest. Even bruised and aching, he *knew* he looked good, and wasn't that just fucking annoying for everyone else.

Steve knew he had made a horrible mistake when he glanced back up and for a brief moment, caught Billy's gaze. That intense stare bored into him and Steve felt this warmth in his stomach, slowly knotting and unfurling before he deeply blushed and looked down again. *Shit.*

He knew he had been caught looking and he tried to console himself with the fact that clearly Billy enjoyed that and lots of people looked at him, it didn't mean anything then or anything about himself. Steven still felt his face flushed when he muttered, just loud enough for Billy to hear.

"I shouldn't have said that man, I'm sorry." All he had to do was

make it right and then he was free to go, no anxiety or moment of regret holding him back.

Billy froze again. Damn. Steve had a terrible habit of getting under his skin, saying just the right fucking things to make him tick and to piss him off. He turned slowly, not caring that he felt as if the water was now needles on his skin. "Don't fucking apologize, Harrington," his voice was low, a threat, his hands clenching at his sides. "You fucking meant it when you said it. So don't fucking apologize to me. That shit's weak."

Then, of course, Billy gestured to himself and grinned that insane grin. "Unless, of course, you're better with your mouth than you are your words. 'Cause I'm totally up for *that* kind of apology." He laughed because everything in his life was a fucking joke.

Steve hated in that moment he shot his gaze back up, the comment was just so sudden and on the nose in the moment. He felt his face get even more red and could not recall the last time he had been so embarrassed. He knew his eyes were wide as he struggled to regain his composure, quickly reaching down and scooping up his discarded sweater, even though he made no move to put it on.

"D-don't be like that, it was just not a cool thing to say and I'm sorry, okay?" All Billy had to do was accept it, nod, something, and he could get the fuck out of here, out of whatever this was. "Okay?" He repeated, pulling at a few little fuzzballs from the sweater,

Billy felt like punching Harrington again. Several times. The guy was too good for anyone, truly. He knew when he was wrong, he apologized, and he expected people to just let it go? He chuckled to himself and leaned back against the tiles. He had to scoot back out of the water to do so, but watching the other teen without water in his eyes was worth it. "Cool thing? Since when have you known about what was cool?" He itched for another cigarette again and decided to turn off the faucet. A rinse was enough, considering he'd be smelling of smoke soon, anyway.

"Tell you what, Harrington," Billy walked out of the showers. He brushed passed Steve, purposely hitting their shoulders together, and grabbed his towel. "Why don't you tell me how you were dethroned,

and I'll forgive that nasty comment of yours." He grinned. Even if what Steve had said was true, Billy wasn't going to let him know that (besides, didn't everyone know it, anyway?). He scrubbed the towel through his hair and hissed a bit when it tugged on his earring. Fuck. He eased the towel away and then went about carefully drying off his chest and waist.

Fuck these bruises and fuck Neil's steel toed boots.

The inquiry startles Steve out of his stupor as Billy *saunters* towards him, at least his mind told him that was what he had done. He had made a point to stay rooted in his spot, plant your feet his mind whispered, with his gaze turned down to the tiled floor.

But the question makes him frown and look up, look over at Billy's face. "What?" He knows he looks confused and that was because he was, it was a strange request to forgive his trespass--not necessarily too much but just not one he was sure he could easily answer.

"I don't....I don't know, you just showed up." And what? He hadn't noticed? Everybody noticed Billy Hargrove. He hadn't cared? Had been too busy dating Nancy? Had been too busy with the Upside-down? What was a suitable answer? Even he didn't know for a moment, hadn't really examined it before his mind supplied: you were trying to not have a failed relationship, and you failed at that.

"I don't know, it just...happened."

"I just showed up?" Billy looked over and felt like his eyebrow was going to simply leap off his forehead. This guy. He snorted and rubbed down his legs and his ass. He ignored his back. Turning would hurt too much, and he wasn't about to strain the damn bruises. He tugged on his too-tight pants without underwear (because, of course he did), and then tugged on a loose t-shirt. That was a first, at least. He simply didn't want the bruises to be touched. It had been a while since his dad had gone all out on him.

"I didn't make you lose the girl." Billy turned, finally, and leaned his shoulder against the locker so he could really look at Harrington. "I beat your face in, yeah, but you were toppling before I came along, pretty boy." He glanced over to the side of the room. "Mind bringing

this outside? And not to beat your face in. I need a smoke.” He pushed off the locker and grabbed his bag. He was being civil. For now. Exhaustion was part of it, if he was honest with himself. He knew, though, that if he skipped school, he’d just get beaten again. He snorted again at the thought and exited the locker room to the outside instead of into the hallway.

Steve found himself strangely following behind Hargrove, just by a step as he mulled over his words. He knew it was true, he and Nancy had been done since the first time they split up, long before even his first encounter with the Upside-Down. They may have been together, cuddling and kissing and having sex, but neither one of them had really been there, not really anyway. Nancy had probably been in love with Jonathan already then, even if she didn’t know it. And Steve--where had he been? Wrapped up in his own shit until it was too late to wrap himself up in Nancy’s.

He didn’t really have a good answer for Billy, and slipped on his sweater as they walked. He didn’t see anybody else at the school and was unsure how long he had been in the locker room with Billy. He’s silent until they’re outside, and when Billy lights up and looks at him expectantly, he’s not sure what to say. Part of him knew he could just leave, they were outside after all, but he stayed there, fidgeting.

“I don’t think I have an answer for you, man.” He muttered, quietly and unsure of himself. “I was just....not into it.”

Billy ignored the way his hands shook when he lit the cigarette. His body was retaliating. It wanted rest, and as much as he needed it, he wasn’t going to take it. He’d push until he’d pass out (as long as he wasn’t behind the wheel of his baby). He sucked in, enjoying the bite of nicotine and the denseness that filled his lungs. He let it sit, closing his eyes, and then exhaled through his nose. As he did, he opened his eyes and looked over at Harrington.

“No answers? Sucks. Thought you’d be more interesting, being King Steve and all,” Billy drawled. He turned and then looked over Steve’s face. Honestly, he hadn’t... he didn’t remember a lot of what he did to Steve. After his pops slapped him and pushed him around, he was just wanting a fight, and Steve happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. He glanced over the bruises, the cuts along his lip,

and then away. "Your face should get you cred, though." Billy shrugged. "Still walkin' around, at least." He finally pulled the cigarette away from his lips. Maybe he should just skip. His dad wouldn't find out. He could just go driving.

For some reason, Steve laughed at that. Cred? He was sure he was well past any cred right now, going around with kids as their glorified babysitter. If anything, he just looked terrible and off-putting. He wasn't even sure if this would have gotten him any credit when he was "King Steve" either, and if anything he felt like it said that his fighting prowess was shit.

"I don't think it's gonna work out that way for me." He shook his head, a small smile still on his lips as he cleared his throat. What would cred even get him? In bed with a girl? A pat on the back from Tommy? Who gives a shit.

"And you don't need to call me that, it's not....necessary, *your Majesty*." He quipped, hopefully trying to point out to Billy the ridiculousness of the nickname.

Billy's stomach tightened as Steve laughed. It was a different reaction than he was used to. People didn't generally... laugh around him, not like that. He glanced over at Steve, surprised, and then tore his gaze away before he could be caught. He bit the filter of his cigarette again and breathed through his nose. Then, of course, he was hit with another surprise. The emphasis Steve put on the stupid name made heat rise from deep inside his gut, to his chest, up his neck, and into his cheeks. He coughed around his cigarette, pulled it out of his mouth, and continued to cough for a few moments. He was trying to breathe through his nose, lungs burning and eyes watering.

Jesus. Christ. He threw his head back and laughed. His earring tickled his neck, thrown back with the movement, and he raised his foot to rest it against the school building. It at least gave him leverage.

"Fuck, Harrington. Full of surprises, aren't you?" Billy winced and realized that, perhaps, laughing like that hadn't been the best idea. The bruising was lit up again, like fire, and he hunched his shoulders to ease the stretch.

For a moment he had joined Billy in laughing and when Billy started coughing, Steve nearly reached out to touch his shoulder, jokingly ask if he was okay because he wasn't sure he had ever seen Billy cough before despite the surprising amount of cigarettes he was sure he had seen him smoke. Steve stopped himself though, the gesture was too intimate in this precarious situation. And frankly, he wasn't sure Billy still wasn't going to beat his face in again.

Part of him wanted to comment on what Billy said as well, full of surprises--the reality was that he spoke too quickly far too often. Nancy didn't always appreciate it, thought that his sarcasm and somewhat teasing humor could border on cruel. He had tried to be more thoughtful for her, but then again he tried to be a lot of things for her.

His smile faded a moment when he saw Billy wince, but he still kept it light, his tone just a little teasing as he tried to keep concern out of his voice. "I think you may have enough cred for the both of us...are you sure you're okay?"

Billy saw the way Harrington reached for him, and part of him wanted it. There was also a part of him that wanted to punch the guy in the face for trying to care. He held his cigarette in one hand now while breathing in and out shakily to calm his lungs. Instead of punching Harrington, he leaned back against the building and cleared his throat. Damn. The pain reignited that anger he had for the other teen because, well, he wouldn't be this way if Max had just gotten in his damned car. He rubbed his eyes and then dropped his head back against the bricks. The thud didn't bother him, even as pain raced through his neck.

"Remember, Harrington," Billy warned, that maliciousness back in his voice, "No one cares. Don't go making yourself a liar now." He looked away from him too soon after the threat, and he knew it. He dropped the cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out with his shoe. What was said earlier was true, after all. Billy had himself, and that was all. Fuck, that was all he needed (right?). He suddenly missed California. The beach. The waves. The sun on his body. Man, fuck this place.

"Is Max hangin' out with your group of nerds tonight?" Billy still

hadn't looked at Steve yet, too concentrated on not showing any sort of weakness (how he had not realized that what he was doing was a weakness was beyond him).

Steve opened his mouth for a moment to speak, to once again apologize for what he had said. It was cruel and a mistake--clearly one that had cut Billy a little too closely and he would harp on it. He really hadn't been thinking when he said it, just angry about what Billy had called Nancy. He just felt that there had been no other way to tell Billy that he had no desire to fight him, not unless it was protect somebody he cared about. And no matter what, he would always care about Nancy.

Steve sighed, this had been arguably the most pleasant few minutes he ever had in Hargrove's company and after the Upside-Down, he was just tired of fighting. He was fighting enough when he tried to sleep every night, why couldn't the rest of his life just be normal? What the fuck did he have to do?

Steve eyed Billy and after a moment, he stepped to the side and leaned back against the building right beside him. He eyed Billy for a moment, Steve was taller-just barely-why hadn't he noticed that before? Likely because Billy's build always implied that he was larger than life.

"They're not *my* nerds, but yeah, they're all gonna play games, stuff their faces, the works." Steve was invited to play, and while he appreciated the gesture, he didn't understand the mechanics of the game for the life of him.

Billy felt his body tense as Steve stood beside him. It was the closest they had been without trying to tear out each other's throats (he was usually the instigator). He shook his pack and pulled another cigarette out of it. He flicked his lighter several times before it ignited, and he sucked in a lungful of smoke as it finally lit the end of his cig.

"You enjoy babysitting 'em?" Billy tried to make the excuse that he was being nice because no one else was around, but in reality, he was tired of being alone. In Cali, he had friends. Fuck, he had been surrounded. He had a boyfriend. He had the beach. It was a lot

calmer there. It hurt to think that who he was had caused all of this.

“And, Harrington, when I come to pick up Max, she better be there, and I better not get shit out of you.” A second run in with his pops may just land him in the hospital. Hell, he had been worried that his sternum had cracked. He shifted against the wall of the school and tilted his hand, cigarette between his fingers, to Steve. He hadn’t looked at Steve yet because his usual threats lacked his viciousness, and he didn’t want to see what Steve thought about it. “Wanna pull?”

“They’re fine, just kids doing like, nerdy shit.” Steve mumbled, because of course then the question that began was: why the fuck was he hanging out with these kids? Steve couldn’t even begin to explain that, not even just because of the Upside-Down and everything they went through. Even he was unsure why he was still hanging out with kids.

He still felt strangely protective over them, wanted to be close to them just in case none of this was over. But he didn’t want to think about that, think about the dark thoughts of how close they were to being ripped apart. He frowned, lost in thought, meaning to reply to Billy when he had grabbed the cigarette but not yet taken it from Billy. His thumb pressed over Billy’s warm hand as he just stood there for a moment.

When he realized what he was doing, Steve jerked a little and took it wordlessly. (How long was he touching Billy?) The refusal had been there but he took a deep drag to cover up his hesitancy.

He immediately regretted it as he started coughing hard, only having barely smoked before when he was pleasantly buzzed with tiny puffs that didn’t really reach his lungs.

Billy could hear the note of affection in Steve’s voice, even if he *did* just say they were just kids. Something had happened to make Steve care about those shits, and Billy wondered why or how. Hell, it was hard enough for him to just look at Max (reasons, damn it). Steve had a whole fucking crew. He frowned and then realized that Steve’s thumb was over his hand still. It had been a couple of seconds more than he expected, so he looked over to figure out what the hell the guy was up to. The warmth disappeared instantly, then, and he

clenched his jaw. He would *not* get into that type of trouble here. He didn't need it. He *couldn't* have it.

Of course, the teen was ripped out of his own musings when Steve started to hack up a lung. He laughed, amused, and turned himself so he was more or less facing Steve, which put them within a foot of each other. "The fuck kind of asshole doesn't know how to smoke?" He asked, his lips falling into a grin as he watched Steve struggle with the nicotine. "Honestly, Harrington," Billy reached out and took the cigarette from him. After a solid inhale, he thought about what he used to do with his boys. They'd exchange smoke while kissing, and he wondered how Steve would handle that. The idea made him blanch and he turned back to stare at the fields behind the school.

Billy couldn't have that luxury. "So, you play that shit with them? Like, the whole..." He waved his hand, not knowing exactly what it was called, and then shrugged. "Or y'think you're up for some drinking? I sure as shit am. Your face is wrecked. I'm, well," Billy chuckled, "Always lookin' for fun. What d'you say, Harrington? I drop off little Maxine and we hit the drinks." Besides, this could be an easy way to open Steve up. Or it could end up in a whole fucking mess, but Billy was used to that—so, whatever.

"I know how-how to fuckin' sm-smoke asshole—" Steve coughed out, tears in his eyes as he shook his head, trying to clear the fit. He tried to catch his breath and released it shakily, his pride slightly wounded in front of Billy as he swiped at an errant tear that had managed to run down his cheek.

Steve cleared his throat, he leaned heavily against the building with his pelvis jutting out forward. "It's Dungeons and Dragons, I don't like get all the rules or whatever but it's fine, I mean it's not like the worst thing—wait did you just invite me out?"

Steve blinked in surprise, it wasn't exactly a great idea. He hadn't drank since that party with Nancy, not really anyway. There had been a couple hard nights where he had drank to excess just to be able to sleep, but that was when he was alone and purposely trying to just lose control to something to help him sleep.

Then again, if Billy was making an effort to be friendly, maybe he

should take him up on it. He was sure his face would thank him in the long run.

Billy narrowed his eyes as Steve wiped away tears. Honestly, his cigarettes weren't even that bad. He was just convinced that Steve had no balls. He snorted and took another drag of his cigarette. "Dungeons and Dragons will never get them laid," he mused to himself and then shrugged. The movement made him flinch. Fuck. He kept forgetting about the bruising, and how the fuck did that keep happening? The beating had been memorable.

"I didn't *invite you out*," Billy worked his jaw and looked over to Steve. "Don't make it sound weird, pretty boy. I'm askin' if you'd like to get trashed. Your face is already there. May as well let your brain follow."

Of course, Billy wasn't a stranger to alcohol. The whole school knew that by now. He wouldn't admit that it was a way to forget and to maybe hit on girls so that he could keep this stupid shit up. It was easier for him to act sleazy while drunk as fuck, after all.

And whose fucking business was it if he decided to get drunk with Harrington, anyway? Everyone would just assume that the brawl had settled things and that they were less 'going to kill each other.' Which was debatable. Harrington had a punchable face.

Of course that was exactly what Steve wanted, all of this behind them. And if the only way to make that happen was to get drunk with Hargrove, well that wouldn't be the most depressing thing that happened to him that week.

"They're little bastards, they don't need to get *laid*." He couldn't imagine Dustin summoning the courage to cop a feel, he was still trying to get the kid his first kiss. The kid deserved something nice, a nice girl who realized he was a special kid, a special kid who deserved something more than weird lizards and dead cats.

He pushed that thought away and smoothly grabbed Billy's cigarette with an arrogant smirk. "And I accept." He looked at Billy cockily, square in the eye as he challenged him. Steve took a long, deep drag--before he coughed really hard again.

He shoved the cigarette in Billy's direction, shaking his head as he coughed, "Not a-not fuckin' word--"

Billy rolled his eyes about the comment on the kids not getting laid. Everyone, at some point, needed to get laid. He smirked at that and looked over. Then, of course, Harrington did something stupid and took his cigarette. He watched, bemused, as Steve tried *again* and ended up coughing--*again*. He laughed, then, loud and without malice.

"Shit, man. Gonna have to teach you how to do that right," Billy took the cigarette back and felt his stomach lurch. Like, teaching how to show Steve to breathe in smoke from his own mouth. That would be a start. He ignored the flush in his body and tried to remember the beating from the night before, but it was fucking distracting, and the more he thought about it, the more he fucking wanted to do it.

"So, you got anyone at your place, princess? 'Cause my pops doesn't like me havin' people around," Billy shrugged and grit his teeth. Right. Fuck. He looked back at Harrington and took a slow drag of his cigarette, which was basically gone now. Should just throw it on the concrete.

Steve gave Billy a long look when he heard him laugh. A very distracting thought of, 'He sounds nice like that,' flitted across his mind but he brushed it aside. It was just nice to hear Billy being something other than an asshole--that was until the princess comment.

Steve rolled his eyes, "I'm not a princess, your *majesty*, and no, I don't have anybody over at my place. My parents are out of town on some business trip thing." It was where they usually were, and Steve didn't even really keep track anymore. They hadn't even known he had his ass beat by Billy yet, and he was sure by the time they returned, the bruises would be gone and they would already be preparing for another trip.

Steve would be by himself, cooking small meals when he was home and keeping the few rooms he actually wandered around in clean. It was just something he was used to by now, and while he would throw parties not that long ago, now all he wanted was to be away

from most people aside from the kids.

Billy cocked his head back and looked at the sky. He finally dropped the cigarette and stomped it out with his shoe. He hadn't looked back at Steve yet, but he was thinking about him, and wasn't that rich? He licked his lips and turned his body to Steve. "So, I grab the monster, drop her off, and hit your place." His lips curled into a smirk as he leaned toward Steve. "And you may wanna be careful with that, princess. I may just have you calling me that in public."

The teen laughed again, this time with a bit more intention, and slung his arm around Steve's shoulders. He gripped him for a moment, allowing the silence to stay before looking Steve in the eye. "I'll bring the beer, Harrington. You're the entertainment." He grinned, and it was just as wolfish as it had been before he had beaten Harrington's face in.

"I wouldn't call you that without another beating." Steve winced a little at his words, hoping that Billy didn't take it as another challenge. Even if he had went at Billy full strength, at best he would be able to hold his own--not win, that was for sure. The guy was a beast.

He jerked a little as Billy held him, surprised by the touch, the warmth, and possibly even the affectionate, teasing tone from the blonde. It was a welcome change though and he couldn't help but bump him back, ever so slightly, from his shoulder down to his hip. Part of him wanted to bite back that Billy surely meant that he would bring or have the entertainment, but after one look at Billy's face, he was sure Billy found him quite entertaining. If Billy was still thinking about that King Steve bullshit, Steve was sure that Billy studied him--even just a little to see where everything had gone so wrong for Steve.

'Well good fucking luck, buddy, when you figure it out let me know,' Steve thought as he smirked a little. "My dad has some harder shit, can you handle that Hargrove?"

Warmth spread throughout Billy's body as Steve pushed him back, even if it was only a little bit. Everyone was so fucking careful around Billy. No one tested him, pushed the limits, or tried to get on

his level. The idea that, after a beating, Steve was still meeting him there put a thrill through him and made him appreciate Steve. He looked over at the taller boy and grinned.

“That sounds better than beer, Harrington, but you'd better keep up with me,” it was as if Billy was going to do something terrible to him if he got blackout drunk, but by the grin on Billy's face, he may have just been teasing. Even Billy wasn't sure at this point. Steve was... an anomaly. Billy could switch back and forth between punching him and doing other, just as terrible things to him.

“Eight, yeah?” Billy squeezed his hand on Steve's shoulder, still amused with how scrawny he was in comparison, and looked back at the school. They were practically skipping. Poor Harrington--getting all caught up in Billy's antics. He laughed, which probably looked really fucking weird.

The thought of getting wasted with Billy Hargrove would put a frown on Nancy's face. Steve could imagine it, pinched and her lips pressed in a line as she judged him. But for some reason in that moment, literally nothing else appealed more to Steve. Didn't he deserve just one night where he could forget? Forget his shit with her, with Billy, with creepy ass government shit in Hawkins, and be a normal fucked up kid? Shit, he practically owed it to himself.

Steve laughed, feeling a little giddy already at the prospect, and soon they were in the parking lot. Steve spun out under Billy's shoulder and faced him, walking backwards as he grinned. They were the last two cars in the lot.

“Worried about me, Hargrove? You should be the one preparing yourself because I'm going to drink you under the table.” He bumped into one of their cars, the Camaro he realized, as he looked at Hargrove, still smiling.

Billy felt like a damned predator. He stalked Steve as the teen moved away and began to walk backwards. He almost felt...like his normal, old self, and that was terrifying and exhilarating all at once. He grinned, all teeth, as he watched Steve bump into his Camaro. It was good that they had just finished practice and stuck around. No one was there to see their exchange.

The larger teen used his body and arms to cage Steve against the Camaro. If anyone saw, they'd assume they were arguing, and Billy was okay with that. He leaned in close, so that his lips almost touched Steve's ear, "Should I be, princess? From what I've heard, you hold alcohol pretty well. It'll be nice to see that instead of whatever the fuck I've been dealing with." Billy moved so that he could make eye contact with Steve, and fuck him, the guy was still hot as fuck, even with bruises and cuts.

Actually, that made it even hotter to Billy. He had made those marks. He licked his lips and then laughed.

Steve couldn't help the shudder that ran through his body and that small fire, spreading warmly through his stomach. He was concerned he was feeling this way, just a little, but it was the challenge he liked, Billy doing his best to push his buttons. And for once, Steve found himself really enjoying being pushed by Billy Hargrove.

Steve laughed with Billy, shit when was the last time he got really drunk? He remembered he usually had a good time at parties, laughing and dancing, but the last time he had gotten drunk he recalled a lot of groaning afterwards and Nancy pressing water and medicine into his hands with a shake of her head. Everybody saw different things, he supposed.

"I don't know where you heard that from, but I guess you're going to have to see, huh Hargrove?" He challenged and it took him a moment to realize that Billy had essentially held him against the car. Just part of the game, throw him off.

Steve allowed himself to press up flush against Billy, just for a moment, and when Billy's arms were a little slack he moved away. Again he walked backwards to his own car, not taking his eyes off of Hargrove. "Better not like weird shit on your pizza. I'm ordering pepperoni and not taking orders!"

Billy's heart thumped hard enough to hurt when Steve pressed so closely to him. He fought the urge to yank himself back, allowing, if just for a moment, the scent and presence of Steve to fill him. He let it sink into his skin, into his bones, and Billy realized he may be in trouble.

Fuck it.

As Steve slipped away, Billy turned and rest his hip against the door of his Camaro. His blue eyes trained on Steve and held there as his brain raced and his inner demons clawed. No. He was going to enjoy this. Fuck everyone else.

“I'm sure that's not the only type of meat you eat, Harrington!” Billy called back, his grin slipping into a smile as he walked around and dropped into the driver's seat of his muscle car.

Steve shook his head but he couldn't stop himself from laughing, it was an easy banter that he was used to, back when he was King Steve, back when he was a normal teenager. This is what he wanted.

“You're so fucking stupid, man. Get my address from your sister, and be *nice!*” He was still smiling when he opened his door, gave Billy one last smile and nod of his head before slipping into the leather seats. He chuckled to himself, he was being fucking stupid too, he supposed. But goddamnit, he was going to have fun tonight with somebody his age.

He drove away to his house, speeding just a little because he could in front of Billy and hurried home to prepare. ‘Prepare yourself Hargrove, because you're going down.’

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Part 2, lovelies.

Part 2

Billy had laughed at the mention of being nice. What was Steve? His mother? The thought had frozen him for a bit in his car, silently trying to push through the panic it had caused. Fuck his dad. Seriously.

After finding Max, and trying to be nice (damn it), he managed to get the address. He dropped her off at the house and glanced at the front door. Not going in was basically asking for it, but he needed to have a drunk night, no matter what his pops was going to do to him after he got home from being shit faced.

Billy's car rumbled as, minutes later (fucking small town), he rolled into Steve's driveway. And of fucking course he lived here, Billy mused bitterly. What an ass. He pulled himself out of his car and waltzed over to the front door. He contemplated the doorbell, but decided to knock--impatiently. This was Billy, after all, and he was ready to drink Steve under the table.

Steve answered the door quickly, maybe a little too quickly, but had a smile on his face. He was wearing a different, lighter sweater from earlier, light grey and blue. "Hey!" He cried out, a little too exuberant and he mentally kicked himself for it.

'Reel it back, Harrington, Jesus Christ,' Steve thought.

"The pizza just got here, c'mon in, man." Steve stepped to the side and Billy saw shoes by the door, Steve stood there expectantly for just a moment before he waltzed into the kitchen.

Steve had set up the pizza and booze there, along with some soda and mixers. He had raided his father's liquor cabinet and he was sure some of it was really expensive. Honestly, he could never really taste the difference and while his father may be home long enough to notice, tonight he wasn't going to care about that shit.

Billy raised an eyebrow at Steve's enthusiasm, but he assumed this was just Steve (no one was ever that excited to see Billy). He stepped into the home, kicked his shoes off, and followed the other teen into the living room. Of course, Billy still had on his ridiculously tight pants and his loose fitted shirt. His necklace had warmed against his skin, and he was itching to touch it as he watched Steve go through the soda and booze.

"Pretty pristine in here, princess. Lot like you," Billy mused, taking in his surroundings and then looking back to Steve. The guy was turned, so Billy admired the view while he could. After all, his pops thought bringing him here would leave him with no eye candy.

So, hello, Steve fucking Harrington. Maybe that's where his beef came from. He moved to this shit town, sure that, for once, he could keep himself out of trouble (gay trouble), and there was Steve, all fucking pretty and shit. He had basically ruined that dream for Billy. Being infatuated with Steve, even if it was just his body, was dangerous.

“You ready to lose?” Billy grinned. “Wanna make a bet, Harrington? Spice this shit up?”

Steve set slices of pizza on two plates and fixed them both a drink, he wasn't about to say that he had done a little bit of cleaning before Billy had arrived. It didn't mean he was trying to impress Billy, it was just the proper thing to do if he was going to have company over. He had wiped down the coffee table right before Billy's arrival and felt a bit like his mother.

No, cleaning was fine, but Billy could be impressed in other ways. More meaningful ways. “I am *not* a princess and what are the terms? First one to pass out?”

He turned quickly, slightly catching a strange gaze from Billy when he poured them both a glass of his Dad's bourbon, maybe a little too much of it. While he rationally told himself that he should have mixed it, or started out with some lighter, this was Billy. He was going to push him back and get over all this shit between them once and for all. Steve stood and pressed the glass into Billy's hand.

Billy let his expression fall as soon as Steve managed to turn around. If he wasn't quick enough, oh well. They were about to get wasted, and on their own, Steve was going to see a lot more of Billy than he probably bargained for. He glanced down at the glasses, surprised that Steve poured them straight, and took the glass easily.

“Alright, Harrington. If I pass out first, the name princess drops,” Billy brought the liquid to his lips and grinned. He took a pull of it, enjoying the heat that ran down his throat and into his stomach. It curled there and he resisted sighing. Yes. This was good shit. He laughed, then. “And, for me...” He stepped forward, crowding Steve's

because because that is just what Billy *does* and he licked his lips. “Any time we’re alone, you call me king. If you pass out first, I’m king to you, Steve.” He punctuated Steve’s name with a large gulp of the bourbon. His eyes, glittering that blue, were flickering around Steve’s face. Oh, he wanted to be called king by Steve, even if he couldn’t go all Cali with him.

Steve had no idea what mess he had just gotten himself into.

But Steve just blinked at him a little in surprise, he had almost expected something more *risky*. But that was it? Calling him king? He wasn’t sure why it meant so much to Billy, but he was sure that at point maybe it meant a little too much to him too.

He could do that. “Deal,” Steve smirked and quickly clinked their glasses together, sealing the bet. This might be something he could actually win anyway. He quickly downed the bourbon, doing his absolute best not to wince. He usually had mixers, but when was the last time he had passed out? He wasn’t even sure, he knew he would get increasingly drunk but falling asleep was harder, especially lately. Fuck, he was gonna win this, goddamnit. No more nice princess.

“Wanna watch a movie or something? Those little shits left Ghostbusters here I think, and we have a couple movies too.” He gazed steadily back at Billy and automatically refilled his drink, giving a little smirk as he eyed Billy who had been slowly consuming his drink, practically sipping it.

Billy raised an eyebrow as Steve shot the bourbon. Well, that wasn’t a surprise, but it was also interesting. He didn’t figure Steve would do something like that, but he wasn’t fucking complaining. He tilted his glass toward Steve before dropping the liquid down his throat. It

burned, all the way down, and his fingers curled. Yes, *that* was good. He licked his lips and grinned.

“Sure. We can watch and drink,” Billy took the bottle from Steve and didn’t bother to refill his drink. No. Fuck that. Instead, he took a long swig from the bottle itself and then pushed it into Steve’s chest. “Come on, princess. Let’s go watch a film and get shit-faced.” He laughed and sauntered into the living room.

Steve took a deep breath and ignored the plates of pizza, just grabbing the box and another bottle of booze, setting them down on the coffee table before he moved to the T.V. He crouched down as he found the movie and popped it into the V.C.R. He was not going to lose this shit, no way, time to fucking win something. While his back was turned he did his best to put a game face on when he came back over to the couch, flopping down on one end while he grabbed the other bottle and eyed Billy.

Part of his mind whispered to eat something, but he was eyeing Hargrove. He took a large pull from the bottle as he watched Hargrove challengingly as he drank. He knew he should pace himself but the idea of winning was more intoxicating to him than anything else.

The movie began and Steve grabbed a slice, he would clean up later if he made a mess.

Billy slouched down onto the couch and chuckled as he watched Steve set up the movie. The guy had to lean to do it, and he got an eyeful. And he was thankful for it. He licked his lips and took a bottle for himself. Steve was fucked. He drank regularly (for fun and for... other things). He took a long swig of his own, meeting Steve’s eyes. Despite the fact that the movie was started, he didn’t look away from

him. What the fuck were they doing, anyway? Billy had no damned idea, but he wasn't going to fight it. He took another long pull of alcohol.

Although, if he was going to keep up, he'd have to eat. He glanced over at the pizza and then shifted. He could make this a lot more uncomfortable for Steve, and he *did*. He shifted and threw his legs over Steve's lap. He raised his eyebrows, as if to challenge Steve to say anything, sloshing the liquid in his bottle.

Pizza could come in a bit. He was not going to back down from Steve's eyes. He wasn't going to break first, and he'd keep pushing that line with the other teen until he looked away first.

Steve choked a little on his pizza, eating maybe half a slice in one sitting as he watched Billy. Fucking cocky shit, was he going to stand for that? No, no he was not. Hargrove wanted to fight dirty, well there may have not been a plate around to hit on his head but he could do that.

Steve stared back at him, composing himself and tried to look as uncaring as possible. He made no move to push Billy's legs off him and kept his gaze on Billy. Venkman was saying something about their new Ghostbusters' headquarters when, with his mouth slightly open he gave a little smile around the head of the bottle, and he stuck out his tongue just a little before he took another large pull.

The alcohol swam pleasantly in his body and it didn't even taste nearly as bitter as it first did. 'Gonna kick Billy's ass.' He plucked off a piece of pepperoni and chucked it in Billy's direction, laughing at him maybe just a little too loudly.

Billy had been in the middle of taking another long drink of the bourbon when Steve launched the pepperoni at him. He blinked in surprise and then choked on the alcohol. He started to laugh, mid-cough, and flinched. But the laughter didn't stop. He tried, desperately, but that was so *childish*. He finally breathed in through his nose, clutching the neck of the bottle while he tried to control his breathing. Well, hell. Steve coughing over a smoke. Now he's coughing on alcohol. And he had looked away first. Damn it!

"Fuck," Billy flopped back and grabbed the piece of pepperoni Steve threw. He plopped it into his mouth and grinned at the other teen. "You're a fucking child, *Steve*." The man's name tumbling out of his mouth felt good, and Billy wanted to be more invasive, to make Steve uncomfortable. He scooted down so that he was basically sitting against Steve with his legs in his lap, his bottle in his hand, and he reached down to grab a slice of pizza.

Steve watched him with a smirk, both of them were totally ignoring the movie but he had seen it before anyway, several times, with the little shits. He watched Billy tear into a slice of pizza and contemplated his next move. This was a sort of fun and familiar game, but one that he had only played with girls before. He recalled playing it with Nancy that first night in her bedroom. And even though Billy was very clearly a boy, he couldn't really bring himself to stop. Billy was challenging him back and he wanted nothing more than to win.

Steve cleared his throat and he felt his head swim just a little as he moved from his position slightly, leaning far forward over Billy and placing one hand on his thigh. He pressed his weight there as he moved across him, he reached and grabbed the bottle from Billy's hand for a moment.

“Pardon me, *William*,” Steve smirked as he took another large pull, but this time from Billy’s bottle as he looked into his eyes. He drank a little longer than he should have, looking into the blonde’s eyes, a sort of stormy blue, as they gazed back upon him. He didn’t even realize he was squeezing the thigh under him for just a moment before he quickly pressed the bottle back into Billy’s hand and flopped back into his previous spot, a self-satisfied smile on his lips and his cheeks turning pink.

Billy was already feeling warmth all over him. That’s when he knew he was beginning to get drunk (or tipsy? Whatever). The burning moved to his fingertips, to his toes, to the back of his neck. It made him shiver, but he was still aware of himself and the way Steve was looking at him. It made his mouth dry, despite the swig of alcohol he took before Steve *stole his damned bottle*. He looked affronted, but was too distracted by the hand on his fucking thigh to do anything properly. His lips parted, his brain trying to put together two coherent thoughts.

Steve’s hand was on his thigh. He had squeezed his thigh. And then the pressure was gone, and fucking mother fucker, Billy was going to kill Steve. He swallowed, trying to control the loud thumping of his heart as he thought about his next move. He held the bottle again, loose in his hand, as he eyed Steve.

“Pushin’ it, princess,” Billy murmured, but there wasn’t the usual threat there. His voice had dropped an octave, and that was about it. He brought his own bottle to his mouth and let the liquid drain down his throat. Fuck. Fuck. What was he supposed to do? He was already basically--wait. That was it. He grinned and then laughed. “Fuckin’ couch is uncomfortable, man.” At the end of his sentence, Billy shifted and dropped himself in between Steve’s legs. It forced Steve’s knees apart, but fuck if Billy cared. He tilted his head back and

laughed, sprawled over Steve Fucking Harrington and almost halfway into a bottle of good bourbon.

Steve was about to comment that the princess was about to be dropped when Hargrove dropped his head into his lap. He made a shocked noise and jerked a little on the couch as he peered down at Billy with wide eyes. Billy was looking up at him smug as fuck and he couldn't stop himself from pouting a little. *That's not fair.*

He flopped back for a moment, still pouting before he leaned forward again over Billy. "Nope, fuck *you* blondie." He looked down at Billy as he purposely took another large swig of the drink, feeling decidedly better as he then lounged back against the very comfortable couch, snuggling into it just a little and ignoring the slight pressure of Billy's head in his lap. He kept idly drinking as he ripped off another pepperoni and dropped it on Billy's nose.

He laughed way too loudly, a healthy flush on his cheeks as his body shook and Steve rolled in a little on the couch in a fit of laughter, moving Billy's head along in the process.

Billy was laughing himself as Steve stared at him. That *look*. The *indignation*. He wheezed as he laughed, and finally his body didn't hurt. The alcohol was doing its job and numbing him to what had happened the night before. He tipped his head back and then grinned as Steve started to laugh. It jostled him, sure, but he could tell that Harrington was having a good time. And somewhere inside of his oil slick of a heart, that made him feel good.

When the pepperoni was dropped onto his face, Billy snorted. Fucking really? He slid his bottle to the side for a moment so he could reach up, grab Steve's wrist, and yank it down. He took a bite out of the teen's pizza, made a face at Steve, and chewed happily at

the bite. When he looked over at the movie, he didn't know what the fuck was going on, and that was okay with him.

Finally, when Billy decided he wanted another drink and didn't feel like drowning, he sat up and grabbed his bottle again. He took a long pull and just let himself fall back against Steve. He ended up with his back mostly against the arm of the couch, his lower back in Steve's lap, and his legs sprawled out wide on the couch. He grinned at Steve.

"Better watch what ya say there, princess. Just so you know," Billy's stabs were getting sloppier because he was getting drunk, but at least he said something. He laughed again and tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. Fuck. This was nice.

"No, please, there's only so many beatings I can take." Steve was just laughing, really laughing as if he was telling the world's funniest joke as tears sprung to his eyes. His stomach started to hurt and clench as he tried to catch his breath, hitting his fist once lightly against the arm of the chair as he tried to calm down. Steve was successfully quiet for about 10 seconds before he started laughing again, loudly, and unable to stop himself as he half doubled over.

He could feel that his cheeks were flushed, deeply flushed, and the warmth wasn't altogether unpleasant. Steve didn't really care if he looked like an idiot. He glanced up just once at the screen, watching Venkman call the government official an asshole and he dissolved in another fit of laughter. For a brief moment he was doubled over and his forehead pressed to Billy's before he squirmed and arched on the couch.

He jostled Billy again as he arched his back, squirmed, and struggled

to yank his sweater over his head. Steve was wearing a shirt underneath and it briefly lifted to reveal his stomach and part of his chest.

“M’hot,” was Steve’s muffled comment under the sweater before he managed to yank it over his head and chucked it in the corner. Part of his hair had messed up and somehow he still had the presence of mind to smooth it down-trying to look up as he did.

Billy was definitely, most certainly better at holding his alcohol. He grinned, wide and uninhibited, at Steve as the guy laughed for so long that Billy wondered if he was going to breathe. When he finally did, it seemed done, and then it started all over again and Billy started laughing, too. What. The. *Fuck*. He breathed through his nose and took another swig of his bottle. Jesus. Harrington was just. He couldn’t even.

“Woah--woah,” Billy snorted, heart picking up as he watched Steve yank his sweater off. His eyes dropped to the swath of skin it presented. He swallowed, hard, and licked his lips. Oh, shit. He took another drink of his bourbon and shifted on Steve’s lap. “Y’know, y’know... usually tequila is the type to get the pretty ones to undress.” He said it before he caught it, but fuck it. Steve wanted real? Billy would give himself over Cali style. “This is. It’s *bourbon*, princess. This puts hair on your chest. It doesn’t--fuck--your clothes shouldn’t come off.”

“It tastes like-like shit and I’m *hot*--I’m *hot*--see---” He pressed his hand to Billy’s face, feeling that little bit of five o’clock shadow as he randomly thought of Dustin and made a hissing/sizzling noise.

“HOT.” He moved his hand after a moment, a moment too long, and actually reached down to boop Billy Hargrove’s nose. He laughed

again, because really, treating Billy like he was a sweet little kid and not some musclebound asshole who could, and had, kicked his ass was hilarious.

“Oh! Wait, wait, do you want tequila? Imma gonna get some tequila--” Steve inquired, suddenly serious as he half rose without moving Billy out of the way, tripping over him and landing on the floor. But this was funny too, and he couldn’t stop himself from cracking up and holding his stomach as he laughed, rolling on the floor and looking back up at Billy.”

“I’m sorry!” He grinned, as if he had hurt Billy on his own tumble down on the floor.

Billy froze as Steve grabbed his cheeks and made that ridiculous noise. Anxiety peaked in him, despite the alcohol, and he tried to shove that terrifying feeling down. It had been so long since he had been around another guy like this. Well, like *this* didn’t mean shit, but. He just. He blinked several times, too bewildered to respond as Steve bopped his nose and then literally *dropped him on the fucking ground*.

“Wait--wait, what...” Billy blinked again and then burst into laughter. “Fucking--*Harrington!* You just. You fuckin’ getting the tequila for me? Is that some... shit...” Billy pushed himself up so he could look down at Steve. “You fucker. Is that some... type of shit to get me to undress? I’m not pretty like you, man. I got... fuck.” He laughed again and dropped back. How the hell had they gotten on the floor again? Shit. He rolled over and grunted, only realizing a moment later that he had rolled on top of Steve. “Shiiiiit.” He pushed himself up again, wobbling on his knees, his hands planted next to Steve’s head. “You want me to strip, princess? Cause you don’t need to feed me tequila to get me ta do that.”

Steve found that especially hilarious as he dissolved into a fresh round of laughter, only half ignoring that Billy was on top of him. Billy was warm, really warm, but not really a warmth that was bothering him at the moment.

“Do I want you to strip? Do *I* want you to strip??” He laughed out, and for a moment it almost sounded like Steve was going to be cruel, call him a queer or some shit like that before he helplessly laughed. “You’re fucking half-naked all the goddamn time Billy! Are-you even wearing underwear now? Jesus Christ, you’re already giving me a free show!”

And Steve wasn’t even sure when he had really noticed that Billy never wore underwear after practice, but for reason he had noticed, mostly because it had to be unusual right? How the fuck could somebody wear jeans that tight and not wear underwear?

He laughed as he placed one hand lightly on Billy’s side, feeling his ribs expand as he breathed as he lifted his other arm over his face, resting his forearm over his eyes but unable to stop himself from helplessly giggling at the idea that Billy Hargrove was *decent* at any point in his life.

Steve wasn’t fucking lying. Billy didn’t like clothes. They were stifling and everything he hated about this town. Cali was better. He could be half naked all the damn time and nobody gave a damn. He grinned to himself, lopsided and pleasant. He hadn’t even concerned himself with Steve lashing out at him. Like this, he could have just kicked him, but Steve just wasn’t... malicious, so Billy didn’t think much of it.

“Actually, since you’re *so interested*,” Billy leaned down, basically doing a pushup to bring his lips next to Steve’s ear. “I’m not wearin’ anything under these. Nah, Steve, see, I like being easily accessible. You know.” He snickered and pushed himself up again to look down at Steve. The guy’s hair was a fucking mess, and Billy couldn’t help but push some of it back to where it belonged. “Fuck. I’d have... shit, no shirt on. But pops...”

And then he stopped, because *fuck that conversation*. He hoped Steve hadn’t noticed, even in his drunken haze, and stole Steve’s bottle from the table. He took a long drink and enjoyed how it burned down his throat. When he settled the bottle down, he almost dropped it, but caught it just in time before placing it properly.

“And I can give you... more of a free show. Shit. Don’t even gotta ask.” Anything to distract Steve from what he had just slipped.

Of course Billy wasn’t that lucky though, and Steve had noticed. He eyed him for a good moment, his smile leaving his face and it was still in the house aside from the end of Ghostbusters blaring in the background. Venkman was holding Dana.

Steve stared at Billy, a little questioning. He was trying to put together everything Billy was saying, were they still playing their game? Was that Billy’s next play? And really, was Steve going to fall for it? He wanted to ask him what he meant but his thoughts were jumbled up in his head and he was struggling to put it clearly together, address the situation, before he realized--

“Shit!!” Steve sat up incredibly suddenly and really close to Billy, way too close. “Shit, Billy, you’re drunk! You can’t like, drive now-you’re drunk, so you can’t--you can’t go, you know?” And Steve felt

this concern fill him for a moment, this responsibility as he realized that if he just let Billy go home he could get in a fender bender, or much worse. “You can’t right? You know that?” He grabbed the front of Billy’s shirt and nodded at him with his eyes large, kept nodding in a manner that suggested that Billy needed to nod too because he wasn’t going to let this go.

Billy made a strange noise in his throat when Steve sat up and was all but flush against him. He blinked rapidly, trying so hard to put his thoughts together as Steve rambled at him. “Y’think--I’d risk *my baby* to this--shit--” He shook his head and the room spun. Oh, hella fuck. He laughed, then, and finally nodded in return to Steve. “Yeah, yeah. I gotta... I’ll stay. Although, princess... you’re still not helpin’ your whole case about not likin’ guys.” He didn’t even use the word fag. He should be proud of himself. Instead, he just tilted his head forward so that his forehead pressed into Steve’s.

“We need to get off the floor,” Billy suddenly grumbled and moved to get off of Steve. He ended up fumbling and falling backwards onto his ass with a burst of laughter. Man. How long had it been since he laughed like this? Absolutely gave no shits? Didn’t care about what was going on around him because he was *safe* and there wasn’t a beating around the fucking corner. “Fuck, Harrington. Steve. *Princess*. You’re... not that bad, y’know. Can’t hold your alcohol for shit, though. Just sayin’.” But they had both drank *a lot* of really good shit, so Billy wasn’t surprised that they were fucked out of their heads.

When Billy pressed his forehead into Steve’s, he closed his eyes and let out a small, soft hum of pleasure, a small smile danced his face at Billy’s agreement. The contact was just nice, no fighting, but just nice and warm and *solid*.

“I’m not a princess, and I’m *winning*.” It was more that he had just not

managed to pass out yet, perhaps his only virtue with alcohol because he knew he was really drunk. He just didn't give a shit. They were both relaxed and enjoying themselves, right?

When Billy fell he felt another round of laughter leave him, knowing he had at least managed to knock Billy down a little was unbearably pleasant and when Billy laughed, it made him laugh as well.

"Stay, stay on the floor. The carpet is comfy and we can--OH, we can watch Nightmare on Elm Street, you're gonna piss yourself Hargrove! Hold-hold the fuck on." He rolled and half crawled back to the V.C.R., setting up the next movie now that Billy was staying.

Billy was tired of sitting up, so he let himself fall back with a grunt. He stared at the ceiling as Steve scrambled to change the movie, a goofy smile on his face. He tucked his hands behind his head and cocked his knees to the side, as if he owned the place. "Steeeeeeeeeeve~" he called in his most obnoxious voice he could muster. "Is definitely a princess. Does his hair, has a pretty face, a pretty house, proolly... waitin' for someone to. I dunno. Show up or some shit. Knight in shining armor." He snorted and tilted his head so he could look at Steve. "And we didn't even watch the first movie, Stevie. What makes you think we're gonna watch a second?"

When the room stopped swimming (because he was so damn drunk), Billy cocked his head to the side again and stretched. His back popped as he arched it and he moaned. It had been so long since he could stretch because of those damned bruises. He kept that strained hold for a minute before slumping down to the carpet again. "Steve, Stevie, hey, come here..." He moved one of his palms from underneath his head and crooked a finger at Steve.

Steve looked back at Billy, a mild expression of annoyance crossed his face as he replied. "I am *not* a princess, and I'm still winning-!" He pushed in the movie and hit play. And any annoyance was already gone. Steve looked at Billy for a brief moment, slightly turning his head to the side almost like sort of curious puppy before he crawled back over.

Steve snagged the discarded bottle on the floor and took another large pull from the bottle. It probably wasn't the best idea at this point but Steve's expression and point was clear, *see? Still winning.*

Steve sat on his haunches for a moment before he settled into the position. His knees bent in opposite directions, legs slightly spread as he sat on his ass. Normally it would be uncomfortable, but he felt so relaxed as he leisurely drank from the bottle and eyed Billy.

He pulled the bottle away for a moment, but it half-remained in his mouth.. "Whacha want?"

Billy watched Steve closely and tried to think, which was a feat. He licked his lips and glanced over Steve's body. At this point, he didn't bother hiding it. He glanced over the bottle in Steve's hand and then shivered. Steve asking him what he wanted? That was a kick in the gut. *A good one.* He chuckled to himself. Man. If only his pops knew what he was doing. He couldn't keep Billy from pretty boys if he fucking tried, and he moved all the way to fucking Indiana. He laughed, then, and then wanted another drink.

"Need more booze. Don't wanna get up," Billy tipped his head so he could look at Steve again. "Steve, feed me booze. I may just stop calling you princess." Total lie, and the snickering behind it proved that. He lifted himself up enough to grab his own bottle from the

table. The hangover was going to be killer the next day, but he could care less. He sloshed the liquid at Steve and then tipped the bottle up. He let the liquid pour down his throat until he couldn't breathe and then put the bottle back down. He coughed for a moment and then flopped back down.

"Y'know, fuck... y'know, there aren't a lot of pretty boys here. In this town. But you," He pointed at Steve and then laughed. "Fuck--you--even rival Cali boys."

Steve was still drinking when Billy said this and choked a little on the bourbon, a little coming out of his mouth as he half coughed and laughed, because honestly he thought it was the dumbest thing he had ever heard. Of course Billy loved to call him a pretty boy, but he had never really thought of himself as anything other than average in the looks department. Being King Steve and being rich and popular allowed him access to girls, but he was certain it wasn't really his looks.

Especially not compared to Billy. Anybody who didn't think Billy Hargrove was *heartbreakingly beautiful* was a goddamn idiot. He was built like a fucking god and Steve had seen him turn on the charm plenty of times before, watched girls melt for Billy. No, he was okay, but he wasn't Billy.

"You're fucking being stupid man, most of the girls at school wanna fuck you and the guys wanna be *King Billy*." He turned and fell back next to Billy, their shoulders touching on top of one another as he glanced at the T.V.

Billy made a face of disgust and groaned. Yeah. He was good with the ladies, but fuck that, it was a damn cover. He sucked in a sharp

breath as Steve settled down next to him and wished, fucking *wished* Steve swung differently. It was unbearable to be this close to the guy, knowing he was some faggot and Steve wasn't. He chuckled at that, but felt the pain in his chest.

"Nah," Billy shook his head and reached down to play with his necklaces. He turned it over several times as he watched the ceiling. "I'm not interested in any of the girls. They all look the same. Fuckin' sound the same, too." He tilted his head so he could look at Steve and regretted it. The guy's face, lit up by the glow of the television, made his stomach clench. It was fucking stupid how much he wanted to just lip his lips over Steve's. Yeah. He'd get kicked out then, and he'd purpose wrap the damn Camaro around a fucking tree.

Billy turned onto his side so that he could have one hand free. He reached over, curious, and slid his fingers through Steve's hair. Yep. Just as soft as a girl's, if not softer. He snickered at that and continued to run his fingers through the messy locks. "Y'got some movie style hair, man. Shit's ridiculous." He shook his head and then blinked at the way the room spun. "And," he remembered the comment about being King Billy suddenly, as if it slapped him in the face, and his cheeks warmed. "I like it when you call me that." He grinned and tugged gently at some of Steve's hair. "Ya gonna be callin' me that a lot, Steve. I can't wait...can't wait to hear it when you're sober."

And then there it was, Steve softly moaned and closed his eyes as he felt Billy's hand in his hair. He had never told a soul, but he loved having his hair played with, felt that it was both soothing and erotic. He remembered laying his head in Nancy's lap, and she would gently play with his hair and tell him about her day, her classes, maybe even sometimes had been trying to actually study with him. He had never really paid attention to anything she said, more focused on the sensations that shot from his scalp all the way down to the base of his spine. It was this little spark that ignited deep inside him, and god he

really loved it.

But Steve heard himself, opened his eyes and even in his drunk haze had the presence of mind to deeply flush and pull his head away. He wasn't going to speak on it, it was just stupid and embarrassing. A weakness that he really regretted having in that moment and it was slightly sobering. Steve couldn't stand it. He was still beside Billy on the carpet, but his arm wasn't on top of his anymore--their shoulders barely touching as Steve grabbed for the bottle again and took a large pull, way too large a pull. It was quiet for several moments as Steve drank. He glanced once at Billy, his face still flushed and a little ashamed with an expression that clearly read: *please don't*. Steve yanked the bottle out of his mouth as quickly as he grabbed it and hissed a little, it had burned that time.

"Mmm, you are fuckin' dreaming Hargrove, I am winning this shit, easy. Watch-watch-this is like one of the best parts." Steve turned his gaze towards the screen, purposely holding his gaze there as Tina/Freddy terrorized Nancy through the hall of the high school.

Billy had looked down, surprised, as Steve moaned while his fingers brushed through the thick strands. He had almost choked on his drink that he had been taking, but managed to stop himself. He watched Steve, trying to analyze him through the haze of alcohol. Of course, it didn't work well, but Billy was better with alcohol than anyone he knew, so he still had a functioning brain (somewhat). He narrowed his eyes on Steve as the guy got up and grabbed his bottle. An alarm went off in Billy's head and he tipped his head up.

"Think that's... enough for you, princess. Gonna get sick. Alcohol poisoning or some shit," Billy put his own bottle on the table because he had drank just as much as Steve, but he was also a lot heavier and as far as he was concerned, much more experienced. He reached out,

grabbed Steve's bottle, and set it next to his own.

Billy was the handsy type, especially when it came to those he wanted but couldn't have. And Steve fucking Harrington was one of those things. Whether he was going to punch him or grab him was the question. He reached out, instead, and grabbed Steve by that stupid shirt that he wore and tugged him backward. Once he managed to pull the teen back, he grabbed Steve's throat, gently, with one hand and tangled his fingers into his hair with the other.

"Not in my dreams," Billy hissed against Steve's ear. "I'm not... not gonna fuckin' hurt you. I'm not tryin' to embarrass you. Just. Fuckin' chill, man."

Steve made sort of a half-hearted attempt to get it back but when he did so, Billy had grabbed him, and despite Billy's words, when his hand was on his throat and the other in his hair, Steve couldn't just "chill."

It hadn't been his experience with Billy, despite everything that had happened *that* night. This moment could be really cruel leverage, destroying what little bit of reputation he had left that he tried not to care about. It really didn't fucking help that Steve couldn't stop the hard shudder that ran through his entire body as Billy held him in place, and he fucking knew Billy felt him do it.

He wasn't an expert on all things Billy, but he had watched him many times. It was hard not to watch Billy Hargrove. And the guy could be *methodical* when he wanted to. It was the only way Steve knew how to describe it, calculating in a way that suggested to him Billy was more intelligent and observant than he tried to let on. And to have Billy discover this about Steve, in this particular moment, to be

trapped under that gaze, Steve really felt this well of panic rise up inside him, like he was a goddamn experiment in Hawkins lab or some shit.

“I’m chill, I’m cool man,” Steve murmured in a soft tone that did nothing to stop the swell of his anxiety. He swallowed hard, felt some light pressure of Billy’s large hand over his adam’s apple. “I think I’m just...really drunk.” Steve softly replied, wanting nothing more than this to be dropped as he looked away.

Billy kept his eyes on Steve, no matter how much his drunk mind wanted to try other things. He licked his lips and contemplated seeing if Steve was actually chill, but brushed that off. Billy couldn’t risk the rumors, especially if they got back to his pops. Fuck. That beating would probably kill him. He stroked Steve’s throat absent mindedly and then nodded. Good. If Steve was chill, or at least close to it, it’d be okay.

For once, Billy wasn’t trying to trap someone. He was trying to keep Steve stable, as fucking funny as that sounded. He slowly let go of Steve’s throat, brushing his fingers over his jaw as he moved his hand away. His other hand stayed put in Steve’s hair, running through the thick tendrils.

“We both are,” Billy mumbled. He may not be as drunk as Steve, but he certainly was fucking drunk. Whatever. He fisted his fingers in Steve’s hair and forced his head back. It made it so that their breaths mingled. “Stop lookin’ away, Steve. It’s not like... I’m hurting you.” Shit. He had, though. “Fuck. I--your face...” He brought his free hand up to glide the back of his fingers over one of the bruises. “Y’were just the... the icing on the cake, Steve. Seriously. I didn’t mean...”

This is why Billy got drunk in a huge group. When he was alone with someone, it became dangerous. His emotions start to explode and his brain does really, really fucking stupid shit.

Steve's eyes fluttered closed for a moment as his body slightly shook, felt Billy's intense touch and gaze. 'Stop it stop it stop it,' he told himself, trying desperately to retain some control. If he hit Billy or shoved him away, they for sure wouldn't be friends, and they wouldn't be well, whatever the fuck was happening in that moment.

He grunted softly as Billy pulled his head back, his eyes barely open as he looked over at Billy. It was true that the blonde wasn't hurting him, but he was doing something else, something that scared the shit out of him. If he jerked his head, it would be a bigger deal, reveal something about himself that he didn't like, so he stayed still. His heart thundering in his chest as he listened to Billy's sort of rambling, drunk apology. All he wanted to do was look away, but Billy had told him not to. The way Billy was looking at him made him painfully ache and he wasn't at all comfortable with the sensation it was stirring inside him.

And it surprised him, Steve had never expected to hear any sort of regret about that night. It was awkward as he briefly laid his free hand on top of Billy's and patted it gently, way too reminiscent of his mother.

"Don't worry about it man, like...water under the bridge now...." After all, that had been the point of the evening.

Billy snorted and shook his head. The world swam for a moment and he blinked several times to make it stop. "You are too... fucking forgiving, Steve." He loosened his grip on Steve's hair and chuckled.

His body relaxed from when it had gone rigid, and he eased himself back so that he was settled against the couch. His gaze never left Steve, though, intense and glittering with emotions that Billy wasn't ready to deal with.

"What's your life like?" Billy had done this, this whole drinking shit, to get to know Steve--to boil down what happened and how the guy lost his position. He was still curious, and he wasn't going to let it go. Now that Steve was nice and drunk (and so was he, damn it), perhaps the guy would actually open up. "Ya have like... rich fuckin' parents and shit. Why're you walkin' around like... like a kicked puppy?"

Billy had noticed, sometimes, how Steve sort of "went away" during class. He didn't actually go anywhere, but he wasn't there mentally. Sometimes, Billy wondered where he went. He knew the feeling. Fuck, he had lived that (until he became an angry asshole). Now he just wanted to know what the fuck was going on with the other guy. His life seemed perfect, aside from the fall of being King.

Steve frowned at that, what was his life like? How the fuck was he going to describe that? He could tell him the basic, boring shit, but he was clear that that wasn't what Billy was asking him. Billy was harping on whatever happened to King Steve, and he really didn't have a good answer for him. At least not one that didn't involve dragging Billy in all that bullshit. And as tense as things were between them, he didn't fucking wish that on anybody.

He had thought many times if he hadn't gone over to Byers' house that night to apologize to Nancy, he wouldn't know about any of this, wouldn't have to think about any of this. All in all, he wasn't like the little girl, El, what exactly was he bringing to the table in the "party"? Not much. All he wanted to do now was keep the little shits safe, but more often than not, he wished he had never known about

any of this. Made a clean break with Nancy long ago and she would have been happier with Byers, instead of dealing with their *bullshit*.

He gave a little shrug, still mindful of the fact that Billy's hand was still gently in his hair. Steve laid back, using his arm as a pillow as he settled on the ground. "I don't really know what to say, man, what you see is...what you get."

Steve knew that answer wasn't going to satisfy Billy. The guy was dog with a goddamn bone, so before he could protest, Steve cleared his throat, his eyes feeling heavy as the prospect of winning slightly dimmed.

"Tell you what man, we do this again and then...you ask me again. Deal?"

Billy paused, surprised. He stared at Steve for a bit and then nodded. Shit. What was he getting into? He frowned and thought about it again. Fuck being drunk while making stupid, important decisions. "Let's do this," He offered, kicking his knees out so that his legs spread off to the sides. "I tell you one thing about me, ya gotta respond. Like, with one thing about yourself. That's fair, right? He itched for the bottle again, but he knew that if he did, he'd be vomiting something fierce.

"Whatchu say, Steve? One for one? We can go from there?" Hell, this was okay. Billy could just tell him little bits about himself, and if he told something more personal? So fucking what? Steve was so damned trash he probably wouldn't remember it in the morning.

Steve thought about that for a moment, now that was interesting. He mulled it over as he studied Billy. The problem was that he had about

a hundred questions that he wanted to ask Billy, and too many of them were way too personal. Steve was well aware that the blonde was closed off, that they were both in a unfamiliar territory.

“I can’t answer you why I’m not, fucking stupid King anymore, I told you.” Steve suspected that was going to be Billy’s question anyway. There were of course two parts to that, one that he couldn’t answer because he didn’t know, and two, because he wasn’t going to bring Billy down any more. Part of him had this weird inkling that life had at least tried to bring down Billy Hargrove enough. At least they weren’t as close anymore and Steve started to relax, melting a little into the carpet and his voice low.

“But....fine, one for one, what do you want to know?”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Not the point of this, *Steve*. You can tell me whatever. But, okay, questions are good, I guess.” He reached up and slid his fingers over his necklace. He fiddled with it, turning it over and over as he thought about what to ask Steve. Something personal? Probably not. Not yet. He figured that if he wanted to get into Steve’s head, he’d have to push some.

“Your hair,” Billy drawled and then laughed. He couldn’t help himself. “Fuck-fuck-okay. What the hell do you put... in your hair to make it look like that? ‘Cause it’s... it’s pretty fucking... I don’t even know.” He was about to compliment Steve’s hair when he had caught himself, and his grip tightened on the necklace.

Steve let out the breath he didn’t even realize he had been holding, his whole body relaxing as he let out a very loud laugh. He clutched his stomach and covered his face for a moment, remembering his conversation with Dustin. Jesus Christ, somebody else was going to

know his routine? Well, at least that was something that he could probably live down.

Tears were in his eyes as he smiled, shook his head a little, relaxing on the carpet. He cleared his throat and tried to compose himself, at a more pleasant stage of this drunken night than he was moments before.

“Okay, trade--trade secret, right? Hair for hair? I use Fabergé Organics, like the shampoo and conditioner and when my hair is still damp--*damp* right, not, not still wet, I use....” Steve laughed, “Well I use four little pumps of the Farrah Fawcett spray.”

Steve was smiling, he knew it was stupid. The spray had originally been his mother’s, and he had just run out that morning, but then he liked the look so much that he had immediately stocked up on Farrah in bulk.

Billy’s eyebrows kept climbing higher on his forehead until he was snickering to himself during Steve’s explanation. He ran his fingers through his own hair, which, by the way, he did fuck all with. His gaze flickered back to Steve and to his ridiculous hair. It was a mess now. Not cute in a way that it was made, but it was cute because... well, it was everywhere. He shook his head and then flinched. Right. Gotta remember not to do that. Too drunk for that shit.

“That’s girly as shit, man,” Billy snickered again and clenched his hands. He really wanted another drink, but he continued to listen to the more mature part of his head (was there one?). “Now it’s your turn. Don’t know how things work, Harrington? Ask me something.” And then Billy’s eyes were flashing, daring, *challenging* Steve to ask him something that actually meant something. He reached out and

poked Steve's hip with his foot.

That was hard, Steve was well aware that despite the pretense of how open they were being that both of them were straddling a really fine line. Billy had asked him something, well it was personal, but it wasn't something that was so personal that he could really object to it. And in Steve's drunk haze, he struggled to think of what he could ask Billy.

He thought for several moments before suppressing a yawn and stretched a little on the floor as he hummed. What he wanted to ask was way too much, about the bruises, about why Billy was so goddamn cocky, about way too many things. Steve knew he had to play it a little safe, or at least should play it safe as possible, but then how was he going to know about the guy?

Steve looked at Billy for a moment before he pointed to his chest, and it wasn't clear for a moment until Steve tried to clarify that he was pointing to the necklace. "That, I wanna know about that." Steve could tell it was some sort of saint or religious figure, and while he never really got close enough to look, it didn't seem to jive with Billy's personality. Billy always had it on, and sure maybe it was like the only necklace he had, Billy was a guy after all, but Steve thought there was something there.

Billy froze and his fingers tightened around the pendant. He ran his fingers over it carefully. Well, Steve started at a good place, at least. He brought the piece to his lips and ran it over his lower one slowly. Well, that was okay. He could talk about this. "Got it from my mum." He shrugged and grinned. "She was amazing, y'know. Absolutely. Fuckin' awesome." He chuckled and finally reached over. He took the bottle and decided, fuck it, and took a deep drink from it.

“Habit of wearin’ it, you know?” Billy wanted to stroke Steve’s hair again, but he stayed still, waiting for Steve’s question as he rolled the piece over his lower lip.

Steve hummed a little, smiling at him. Of course he had noticed that Billy had used past tense and he wasn’t about to ask what happened to her, he could gather that she was probably dead. If Billy was sensitive about more normal questions, that was officially off-limits without Billy giving him more of an opening.

“It’s really pretty.” Steve mumbled, finally feeling comfortable again and really tired all of a sudden. He hadn’t been sleeping well, probably not really for a long time since he found out about demogorgons and creepy government shit the first time, but the nightmares had been worse and intense since the last incident. The alcohol hadn’t really helped him and he was struggling to stay in the game.

“Hey, you know though, you really shouldn’t keep smoking. You know Joe Camel? He’s not really a camel, man, that’s a tumor on his back.” Steve smiled widely at his stupid joke, his eyes barely open as he looked up at Billy.

Billy grinned at the comment about it being pretty. Of course it was damned pretty. It was a reflection of the only gorgeous thing of his life, and that had been torn out. There was still a wound--open and seething and angry. He finally let go of the necklace. It fell onto his chest with a soft thud and he blinked, then, at Steve’s comment.

“What the fuck,” Billy laughed and shook his head. “Man, you...

you're so fucking drunk. Dude, where's your pillows and blankets? You're not... not gonna make it, and you can't pass out on the floor without something. It's cold." Billy shifted and pushed himself up to his feet, sloppily, trying not to trip as he went. "So, King Steve, where the hell are the blankets? Or something. You can't just sleep there."

Steve gave a little grin. "So, does that mean you concede? No more princess? Because as far as I can tell, I'm still winning." Steve pushed himself to his knees, sitting on them for a moment as he closed his eyes, not thinking about their position as his vision dimmed a moment and his head spun. He had overdone it, for sure, but he couldn't help the laugh that rose to his lips.

Chuckling to himself, Steve struggled to rise to his feet. His legs felt like these dead weights and he stumbled several times as he tried to right himself, his vision dimmed again. He put his hands in his hair and tugged it up with a groan, struggling to come to his senses and it left his hair sticking out in all different directions.

"Fuckin' upstairs, my bedroom and shit is upstairs with the--fucking...blankets and shit. Shit." Steve mumbled.

"You're winning?" Billy snorted and rolled his eyes. Like hell. What he did know, however, was that he needed to take care of Steve now. He looped an arm around Steve's waist and started to walk toward the stairs. "Alright. So. Your room it is." He grinned and pulled Steve forward. "I can just get ya up there. So you don't fall, y'know?"

And how the fuck had it ended up like this? With them stumbling to the stairs? Talking like they hadn't tried to kill each other the other night? "Steve, though. Really." He glanced at the stairs and then stepped up one, waiting for Steve to follow. "You were just... you

were just *there* after pops and I had a run in. And I couldn't *not* bring Maxine home." He clenched his jaw and shrugged. The movement made the world spin, but he didn't mind. "Kill me... if I do that shit again." He snickered and tugged Steve up the first stair, getting impatient with how sluggish the guy was.

Steve felt wasted out of his mind as he felt Billy at his side, holding him up and leading him to the stairs. He sort of shuffled/stepped along, not really feeling like he was able to pick up his feet. He leaned heavily against the blond and fuck, he was really, really warm.

Steve's head lolled onto Billy's shoulder, he frowned just a little, dimly aware that Billy was talking to him again in a sort of awkward apology. He mumbled, "Don't even fucking worry man, water--water is everywhere, man..."

Steve pressed one hand against the wall as they slowly made their way upstairs. He nearly fell just one time, feeling a sudden and tight grip from Billy to keep him upright and not tumbling backwards down the stairs. He thought that was really fucking funny, Billy taking care of him and laughed loudly, a stupid grin on his face and his eyes barely open as Billy dragged him along the hallway. He didn't tell Billy where his room was, had he been asking?, so much as grab at the door and go inside.

Once they were inside he flopped down on his large bed with a groan. Billy was saying something to him and he didn't respond, couldn't bring himself to care as he mechanically undid his belt, shoving his pants down and kicking them onto the floor before he turned on his side. He grabbed one of his pillows half-hugging it to his face as he drifted out of consciousness in his shirt and underwear.

Billy had laughed when Steve almost fell over. At least it was only once, and he wouldn't admit how much he liked that Steve held onto him as hard as he did. He helped him to the room, mostly guided by the way Steve stumbled and shit. When they finally made it there, he froze and held his breath as Steve just fucking undressed like it was... well, he guessed it was normal. Right. Steve had no idea who the fuck he was with (a faggot--his mind reminded him). He watched Steve quietly for just a moment before shaking his head.

"Night, princess," Billy took the covers of the teen's bed and tugged them over him after managing to pull them out from *under* him. He ran his fingers through Steve's hair, figuring fuck it, 'cause Steve was almost asleep anyway. He settled down on the edge just to do that, moving his fingers along Steve's scalp and watching how he breathed. He felt like some damn creeper, but, whatever. Steve was pretty and he was gay. So. Fuck it.

"Not a princess...I'm win-winning..." Steve slurred a little, a soft sigh of pleasure leaving his lips as he felt Billy touch his hair. He couldn't stop the small smile from making its way to his lips as he curled up a little more in the bed. He felt more pleasant than he had in ages, his entire body filled with this nice heaviness that was dragging him down into sleep.

"Get in bed, asshole....." Steve wasn't really aware of what he was saying, but he had a guest who was staying the night. Guests needed a place to sleep. He reached out his arm and patted the bed twice before just letting his hand lay there, his eyes felt so heavy as he laid there and he was dimly proud that the night had basically been a success.

Steve was breathing heavily in sleep after just a few more moments, his face pressed into the pillow and his arm outstretched to where he had invited Billy to sleep.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Part 3.

Part 3

Billy allowed himself to smile because Steve wasn't watching. He didn't move, though, as Steve invited him into his bed. That was just a shit idea. Billy would have problems, and then Steve would find out, and Billy may or may not be killed. Probably so. This town seemed conservative enough that swinging the wrong way could definitely get a person killed. He looked toward the window in Steve's room and wished he had his smokes.

Once Billy was sure Steve was asleep, he got up and fumbled himself down the stairs. It was a little sketchy, but by the time he was in the living room, he was set. He managed to turn off the television first. He didn't want the sound to bother Steve, even if he was too drunk to actually give a shit. After surveying the room, Billy grabbed the pizza box and bottles. He figured Harrington would have a hangover the size of Texas when he woke up. He put the box on the table, recapped the bottles, and put them back in their places.

The question was: did Steve eat leftover pizza? Hell, Billy would eat it for breakfast. He shrugged and folded the box so that it fit into the fridge. There. Now he can't say he was the worst guest. He snickered and wandered to the couch. One he was there, he flopped onto his back and stared at the ceiling.

What the hell was he even doing here? Billy pressed his fingers into his eyes and clenched his jaw. Yet, as his brain tried to lodge stupid shit at him, his body had enough sense to shut down, and finally, Billy passed out on Harrington's couch.

It hadn't even been that bad of a rest, the couch actually being quite comfortable despite what Billy had said when he was trying to get on Steve's nerves and his head on his lap. But there was a loud banging noise above him that jolted Billy awake, followed by a half scream. There were three separate bangs after that and some more shouts, followed by a clear and distinct, "NO!"

Billy had almost fallen off the couch when he heard the bangs. He was so used to his pops that, as he woke, he immediately shied away and raised his hands. When nothing hit him, he blinked blearily and put his arms down. What the--and then Steve was crying out. He pushed himself up, stumbled, and made his way toward the stairs. Shit. His whole body felt like a truck had hit it. Probably the bruises.

"Steve...?" Billy was concerned, sure, but he also wasn't sure how far he could go with Steve. He eased up to his door and hesitated. Would Steve hate him if he came in? Would he even remember that Billy was there? Billy was banged up enough. He closed his eyes, hesitated, and then pushed the door open. "Steve? What's up?"

To say that what Billy found was startling was putting it mildly. Steve was grunting, quickly mumbling "no" over and over again and that homemade bat with the nails in it, the one that Max had swung at him was in his hands. It was currently wedged deeply into the side of Steve's desk, and Steve was viciously tugging on it until he managed to jerk it out, he stumbled from the force of it and staggered back into the corner of his room. He was still dressed as Billy had left him and his hair was somehow even messier.

His eyes were blown wide but they weren't seeing, not really, and Steve's breathing was erratic while he heavily shook. His gaze came across Billy and he screamed again, swinging the bat once and it hit the patterned wall. If he had swung in the other direction, he would have broken a window.

Steve yelled out "No!" again, this time at Billy as he held the bat tightly, his knees slightly buckling which made him halfway slide down the wall. "Stay-stay back!" He wasn't sure who he was talking to, maybe Dustin, maybe Mike, one of the other little shits, he wasn't going to let them get eaten like Bob, he wasn't going to let that happen. They were just kids, they were just kids- "HEY STAY BACK!"

"Jesus fucking christ," As soon as Billy saw the damn bat, his body froze. He stared at the thing, and now Steve was swinging in and *fucking hell*. He jerked back and then raised his hands, uncertain if he was the threat or something else was. He stared at Steve, completely thrown off, his mind racing as he tried to figure out what was going on with him. He swallowed and stepped forward, finally, as Steve started to slide down the wall.

"Steve, jesus..." Billy stepped forward again, nervously, and crouched near Steve. "Hey, Steve. It's uhm. Shit. It's Billy. You-uhm-you good?" He could tell by the wide eyes and the heavy breathing that he wasn't, but Billy really, really didn't want to be hit by that fucking bat. He licked his lips and edged forward. "Wanna drop the bat, princess? Let me have it? I won't let whatever's out there get you. Just give me the bat." And get it the fuck away from him. He edged forward and reached his hand out, palm up.

Steve lifted the bat higher once, but held it there, luckily not

swinging it down on Billy's arm. There were more nails towards the top, and way too close to Billy's body at the moment. Steve was clearly not good, his chest rising and falling quickly as he looked right past Billy. When Billy inched forward, Steve jerked, kept the bat up as he moved into his nightstand and hit it hard with his hip.

He clearly didn't care as he kept his gaze there, twisted and intense as he panted so loudly. His vision dimmed for a moment, pulling at the edges and he could swear he saw that fucking flower-faced monster. Steve was like a cornered animal and looked like he would take Billy's head off as soon as he was in close enough range.

"N-no--get the fuck--get the fuck away!" Those creatures were racing towards them and they would be torn apart, the last thing they would see was those mouths full of teeth opening up, swallowing them, tearing at their flesh-- "NO!" He screamed and it sounded a little hysterical and hoarse, as if Steve had been screaming and crying out for hours.

Shit. Talking to Steve wasn't helping. If anything, it seemed to have drive him further to the edge. He grit his teeth and glanced at the bat. Hell, it wasn't like he wasn't hurt already, so what could go wrong, right? Yeah. That shit. He rubbed a palm over his face and then, with the quickness he used on the court, Billy jerked forward, grabbed the edge of the bat (motherfucker mother--fuck-), and shoved it to the side. At the same time, he managed to pin Steve back against the wall with his own chest.

With the other hand, Billy grabbed the handle of the bat, half of his hand lying over Steve's. He ignored the sharp pain in his hand and the warmth he knew was blood dripping down his palm. He could deal with that. Blood and bruises were normal for Billy--*this wasn't*. He pressed his forehead against Steve's and frowned. "Come on,

Steve. Look at me. Wherever you are *isn't real*. You're with me. Damn it." He used the bulk of his body to keep Steve still, his own breath now choppy from the adrenaline.

Steve screamed and howled at him, and it sounded exactly like an animal being murdered in front of him. Steve didn't stop, wasn't going out without a fight, and he screamed again as Billy pressed him to the wall as hot tears ran down his cheeks.

He jerked against the wall and tried desperately to jerk the bat away, defend himself and the kids. The nails dug into Billy's hand and when he couldn't get it away from Billy, he let out a broken sob and finally dropped the bat. He was waiting there, waiting to be eaten, waiting to watch Dart tackle Dustin, waiting for Dart to take him apart and do what he was made to do from the Mind-Flayer.

He shook hard and pressed his forehead hard into Billy's for a moment and it was *solid*, his breath hot and ragged over Billy's face as he gulped down air. When the inevitable didn't come, he turned his head slightly upwards, his eyes barely opening as he just thought, *so blue*.

He was still panting and a fresh tear ran down a flushed cheek when he harshly whispered, "Hargrove...?"

The noises coming out of Steve tore at Billy because he *knew* pain. He knew fear. He knew what it felt like to be terrified for his life, and here Steve was, screaming and crying and it sounded *exactly like that*. Rich kid, his ass. Something had happened to Steve, and while Billy was probably not going to find out yet, he *would*. When the bat was finally released, he felt some of the nails slip out of his skin and he grunted. Fuck. Ow. He dropped that hand so it wasn't in Steve's line

of vision. He couldn't have Steve freaking out about that and all the other shit, too.

"Yeah, yeah. Hey. It's me," Billy grinned, although it lacked its usual malice. "Y'here now, yeah? In your room, with Billy fucking Hargrove." He was making a joke, at least, trying to get Steve to look at him a little more. He moved his non-bloodied hand to Steve's jaw and ran his thumb over his cheek. "Deep breaths, princess. Calm your breathing. You're gonna pass out."

Pain throbbed in Billy's hand, his chest, his back, but as he took in the horror on Steve's face, the tears on his cheeks, and the obvious way he wanted to simply *hide* from whatever he had thought he was fighting off, Billy wanted to coddle him. He looked back at the bed, but he knew he couldn't go there. Not with his bloodied hand. He breathed out slowly against Steve, still holding his position against the teen. He wouldn't risk getting hit with the bat. Not until he knew exactly what was going on Steve's head.

"Hargrove, what..." Steve cleared his throat and searched Billy's face for a moment. He was incredibly sober now and the night flooded back to him in a torrent. Getting drunk with Billy, flirting with Billy (and since when did he flirt with boys), and Billy leading him into his bedroom. He tried to jerk his head to look at his bed then but Billy held him in place and he felt Billy's fingers on his flushed skin. He could have sworn that Billy was still warmer.

It didn't take but a moment for Steve to realize what had happened, it had been one of those nightmares. He had them since that first night with the demogorgon at Byers', but they had been getting worse, increasingly worse since his time in the Upside-Down. Sometimes he would wake in a cold sweat, Nancy would roll over and ask if he was okay and he would mutter he was just hot and

hurry off to the bathroom. She had fucking been there that time, he couldn't bother her with that shit, she had it worse and so he just never talked about it.

He could see that dimness at the corners of his vision and knew that Billy was right, he had to calm down or he was going to pass out. Steve felt incredibly embarrassed, trying to exhale long and steadily even as his breath shook and his heart was still pounding in his chest. His cheeks still felt incredibly hot as he avoided Billy's studious gaze. What the fuck was he thinking? Inviting Hargrove over here for him to see that? The worst fucking person to see that shit, but he had just wanted one fucking normal night. Just one. And it was too much to ask for, he was fucked right now, and he should have known better.

Steve closed his eye tightly and tears gathered in his eyes in shame, and goddamnit, that made him feel even more ashamed as he bit down hard on his lower lip when he felt a tear roll down his cheek.

His voice was hoarse and a little broken when he whispered, "I'm sorry, man, I-I fucked up a little..."

"A little, Harrington? There's damn holes in your desk *and* your wall. You destroyed your room. Well, kind of. But shit. Just... calm down, okay?" Billy really wanted to run his fingers through his own hair, but he was more concerned with keeping Steve coherent and simply there with him. "You don't gotta apologize, either. Shit's fine. Just... breathe." How many times was he going to say it? And how long had Steve gone without proper sleep? He looked over Steve's face and moved his thumb over his cheek again. "Come on, princess. Y'got some hot cocoa in this place? Tea? Something hot?"

Distract Steve. That was the goal. He stepped back, but only enough

so that Steve could have personal breathing room. He took his hand, then his arm, and tugged him toward the door. "Come on, Steve. Let's get something to drink and then you can hit the sheets again." He still hid his hand. If nothing else, Steve was already feeling beaten. "Unless you'd like to just slip back into bed. We can do that, too." Not that Billy had been in Steve's bed, but damn, maybe having a warm body next to him would help Steve sleep. "Well? Watchu want, princess?"

Steve shuffled along with Billy, waited for the other shoe to drop. Waited for Billy to throw him a cruel smirk and make fun of him, call him a little bitch or something like that. He frowned and dragged his feet a little and he knew Billy was watching him.

The truth was that despite waking up, he really didn't want to be that fucking far away from the bat. Since the incident, he had made several during one particularly violent night after the first incident. He hadn't talked to Nancy, didn't go to school for two days under the guise of the flu, and just made a half dozen of those fucking bats. Three of them were in his room, two were in the car, and another was in the tool shed, which was right beside the pool.

Steve also didn't miss that Billy had said "we" could slip back into bed. He hazily remembered inviting Billy into his bed the first time Billy was in here, and hell, it really was big enough for the both of them--even if Billy was a big bastard. He fixed his gaze on the blonde for several long moments, and some strange part of him in that moment really appreciated his strong build. What would Dustin say? Barbarian class--a strong warrior. It felt weirdly reassuring, even if he wasn't going to voice it in that moment, that Billy was there and Billy was fucking strong.

"We can just go to bed, I'm okay now..." Steve mumbled, still

mortified by the whole situation.

Billy tilted his head and watched Steve closely. He needed to go wash his hand off, but there wasn't a way without Steve finding out. He flexed his fingers and relished in the sharp pain that bit into his palm. Sometimes, pain kept him level-headed. "Alright..." Steve wasn't even arguing with being called princess, and that concerned him. He looked over to the bed and then hesitated. "Why don't you climb in. I'm going to the bathroom. Y'mind? I'll be just a minute."

After all, climbing into bed with Steve now was less of a boner danger and more of a 'Steve's going to find out he's fucking gay' danger. Fear settled in the bottom of his gut, but he refused to give into it. Instead, he watched Steve watch him. The guy was evaluating him. Why, he wasn't sure. What he was thinking? Sure, he was interested in that piece, but he doubted Steve wanted to talk. "That sound okay? You climb in and I'll be right back. I won't leave." As if. Leaving Harrington like this was just... not okay with him, now, not after last night.

Steve nodded and went over to the bed, dutifully climbing in for a moment before he rose back up again. He moved towards something before he stopped, looked over at Billy who was still watching him. Steve had forgotten about Billy for a moment and felt even more embarrassed as he cleared his throat and paused before he moved incredibly slowly to his wall. There was a soft flush on his face as he fucking plugged in white Christmas lights of all things, fairy lights. Their soft glow filled the room and he stood there for a moment with Billy watching him, still in his fucking shirt and underwear, before he quickly hurried back over to the bed.

That was his routine, and Billy being there disrupted his routine, but he knew that they had to be on. He normally always had them on

before he went to sleep, and had just been too drunk and stupid to plug them in before.

“It’s fine, go, go to the bathroom, I’m fine--I’m okay, really.” Steve Harrington might be a lot of things but okay was not one of them.

Billy watched Steve move around, and as the glow of the lights flickered on, he fought the ridiculous fucking urge to smile. That was *unbearably Steve*. He tilted his head, amused, and watched still as the teen climbed into the bed. “Don’t fucking go anywhere, Harrington. Stay there. I’ll be back.” He pointed his good hand at him and turned. He moved his other hand in front of himself and walked out.

Part of him was worried that Steve would bolt or do something stupid. He wanted to stomp back there and make sure he didn’t, but that was stupid. Billy wasn’t his god damn parent, and he wasn’t his... fuck, what was Billy doing here? He eased a door open and sighed. Good. Bathroom. What the fuck would he do, anyway? Cuddle Steve until morning, and then get the fuck out? Probably. But the look of horror and Steve’s screams would give him fucking nightmares. He yanked the faucet on and dropped his bloody hand under the water.

Trying to blank his mind, Billy simply enjoyed the pain. He closed his eyes and let the burn wash over him. The bites. The stings as the water flushed out the holes in his hand. There weren’t many, at least, they were just a bit deep. Whatever. It wasn’t like it wasn’t his first rodeo with holes in his body. He chuckled at that and crouched, hand still below the water, to rummage for something to wrap it in under the cabinet.

And there was Steve’s products. He laughed softly to himself and

shook his head. Fucking dork. He grabbed what looked like a first aid kit, pushed himself up, and dried his hand enough to properly wrap it. Which was going to be a bitch. Shit. Fuck. He groaned. Well, not getting Steve involved wasn't possible now. Damn. He grabbed the box and stalked back to the room.

"Hey, princess, ever wrap someone up before?" Billy grinned as he leaned against the frame of the door. "Cause I can't do this one-handed, and you're mostly able. Not completely useless."

Steve was about to giving him a biting remark, maybe a little nasty because he was fucking sensitive at the moment, when he looked at Billy's hand. He definitely didn't have that when they were drinking, so of course that meant that he had caused it. Steve paled a little and gave a jerky nod, guilt rising up from his stomach all the way to this throat. He clearly hadn't intended it and he was sure Billy knew that, but fuck, it wasn't like he deserved to deal with Steve's shit.

"Yeah, of course man, c'mon over." He sat up in the bed and cleared his throat. Steve tried to look and feel like a totally fucking normal person, maybe even a person helping out their friend and not a psycho who had swung at somebody trying to help him with a bat riddled with nails. He gently took Billy's arm by his wrist, gripping it there for a moment as Billy extended his hand. It was still a little wet, which explained the lack of blood everywhere. Steve took a cotton ball, doused it with antiseptic and glanced at Billy's face.

"....Sorry man." He began to clean the wound, and he was just really fucking sorry. For being a fuck up, for the nightmare, for hitting Billy, and now for cleaning his hand with this shit that he knew stung like a bitch. His brow furrowed as he tried to concentrate on cleaning the wound. He didn't look at Billy when random concerns flittered through his mind.

“You’ve had like, a tetanus shot, right?” It was stupid and his inquiry bordered on motherly, but he couldn’t help this small swell of panic that he may have caused even more damage.

Billy had done exactly what Steve had told him to--he walked over and plopped onto the bed so that Steve could have full access of his hand. He handed it over, watching with interest as Steve began to wipe down and then disinfect his hand. The burn hurt, sure, but Billy didn’t really respond, his eyes on Steve. He was used to pain. What he wasn’t used to was the idea that he may have a friend. He may have some sort of hope, and that was dangerous. He needed to stomp that the fuck out before it turns him into mincemeat.

At the question about shots, he barked out a laugh. “Nah, man. My pops ain’t got time for that shit. I’ll be fine. A little iron in my blood won’t hurt,” He grinned at Steve. “And just so you know, since you were out wherever the fuck you were, I *grabbed* your bat. I didn’t have to. It was my choice, Harrington, so don’t fucking go guilt trip on me. It’s not like I haven’t seen blood before.”

Although, the idea that Steve cared enough to ask made his chest ache. He looked away quickly, then, and stared at the holes Steve had put in his wall. Would he ever get the truth out of him? Nothing in this stupid shitty town would make Steve that fearful, that horrified, so what had happened? He glanced back to Steve and shifted, still sitting just as well as he had before. Truly, the nail holes didn’t bother him too much. He did that to himself.

Steve was very quiet when Billy quipped about the iron, once again commenting on his father. It hadn’t been the first time that he had said something like that, and he knew Max never talked about her stepfather. What exactly was Mr. Hargrove like? He had some....suspicions, that he didn’t dare voice, because Billy would

take it wrong and get upset, and that was the last thing that he wanted in this really, really fucked up night.

He gently bandaged Billy's hand, still wracked with guilt despite Billy's kind words--and seriously, when the fuck was Billy kind? Steve was confused as all fuck when he finished and managed a tight smile. "You'll be good as new, like, like a porcupine in reverse." It was stupid, but Steve didn't know what to say other than sorry again. He owed Billy a lot for this, and he fucking knew it and felt extremely grateful to Billy fucking Hargrove.

Steve turned down his legs under the blankets and hesitantly laid down in the bed. He watched Billy intently, fully expecting Billy to welch on what he said and go back downstairs. Inviting a guy to sleep in your bed when you're both wasted was one thing, but they were both way too fucking sober now.

Billy furrowed his brows as he felt the bandage move over his hand. His fingers twitched because it was painful, even if he hadn't said or made any complaint. Yet, as Steve's fingers brushed over him, touched his skin and bandaged him, Billy realized that Steve was digging a pit into his heart and burying himself there. And Billy knew that this was going to fuck him up beyond repair (was he even repairable now?). He shifted and finally glanced over so that he could watch Steve wiggle beneath the covers.

Should he stay? Go? Throw caution to the wind and *know* that Steve would find out what kind of sick fucker he was? He closed his eyes and resisted the urge to rub his face. He breathed in slowly, measuring his thoughts. If he went home, his pops would be waiting. He'd be heard. Fists would be thrown. A night in Steve's bed sounded so much better, even *if* he was cruising for a beating eventually. Might as well get something out of it if he was going to suffer at some

point.

So, throwing his damn caution and common sense to the wind, Billy scooted beneath the covers and turned slowly, careful of his bruises, to look at Steve. "What d'you need, princess? Looks like you haven't slept since you were born," he grinned a bit, but knew it didn't reach his eyes. "Tell me. Just tonight, though, Harrington. You get this from me tonight. No other time."

Steve watched Billy intently, carefully, as he slid into the bed. Steve hadn't forgotten his bruised body in the locker room and he pondered Billy's words. Steve bit his lower lip, *shit*. "And...this never gets out, you swear? You give me your word?" He looked into Billy's eyes, searching for him to give him complete honesty in that moment because Steve knew what he wanted.

Billy furrowed his brow and he scoffed. "Steve, princess, if I offer something, I'm not gonna go back on it. And, y'know, you got my word. Just... between us. Just tonight." He bent his arm so he could rest his cheek in the palm of his hand as he watched Steve, assessing what the guy was looking at, his expression, everything, under the dim glow of the lights.

With that, Steve launched himself at Billy, quickly wrapped his arms around his side and pressed his face right against his neck. His eyes were wide and his eyelashes gently fluttered against the skin there as he gently squeezed around Billy's waist. He didn't want to say anything, just really wanted to express his gratitude and that this was all he wanted--just some comfort and warmth.

Since the whole thing had happened, there hadn't been anybody that he could talk to, not fully anyway. And all the people who knew the

full story either had it worse than him or were fucking children. What the hell was he going to do but suck it up? So he hid it from Nancy. Hid it from his parents. Would wake up from a nightmare and fucking do his best to muffle any sobs the few times his parents were actually fucking home.

Steve pressed himself against Billy, gently tangling their legs together as he buried his face against the skin there with his head tucked under Billy's chin. His fingers pressed into his back as he held onto Billy like a lifeline, trusting that this wasn't going to leave the room tonight. All of this fucking weak, pathetic bullshit was going to stay here because there was at least one person he couldn't fucking hide this shit from. He inhaled sharply, smelling and tasting the scent that was Billy Hargrove. There was nicotine there, some cologne that he had doubt used, and just something spicy--Like a mandarin orange. Steve liked it, really liked it.

Billy Hargrove confused the fuck out of him, but right then he was the only goddamn person he trusted on this entire planet not to treat him like shit, and that was maybe the weirdest revelation that he had since this whole fucking thing began.

Billy grunted as Steve launched himself into his body and wrapped himself around his waist. He didn't mind, no, but his bruises throbbed. He ignored the heat that flushed through him, the thumping of his heart, and the way his bruises twinged as Steve strengthened his hold. No, he wouldn't move away, but he certainly enjoyed the heat that Steve created. He let out a rough sigh and let one of his muscular arms drop over Steve's waist.

"Hey, princess," Billy murmured. His other arm, which had held up his cheek, slipped down and underneath Steve's cheek. He bent his elbow so that his fingers could run through Steve's hair. "I'm gonna

guess you don't get this much," he chuckled to himself. Fuck, who was he kidding? He also never got this. He tightened his fingers in Steve's hair and resisted the urge to kiss him. It literally made his chest ache to think he was so close to Steve and yet so fucking far. He stared at the wall and then glanced down to the teen in his arms.

"Y'okay, Steve?" Billy hated the warmth in his voice, how he sounded like he *cared* because he fucking *did* and now Steve was inside of him and there was nothing Billy could do about it.

Steve tightened his hold for a brief moment before he relaxed his grip, he wasn't stupid. He didn't want to hurt Billy by being so goddamn needy. He just...really appreciated him that moment, deeply appreciated Billy Hargrove.

When Billy ran his fingers through his hair, he closed his eyes, remembering what had happened earlier. Jesus Christ, he had just been embarrassing himself all evening, hadn't he?, and what the fuck were they doing? He breathed Billy in deeply, and even he could hear the concern in his voice. Something was happening, that was for sure. It was that electricity, he could feel it so strongly, thrumming low but hard throughout his whole body.

Billy had a reputation to protect and plenty of other things going on in his life, Steve remembered his awkward apology from earlier in the evening. Was everything okay between them? It just felt even more fucking complicated than ever, but he also knew he had absolutely no desire to push Billy away. The way Billy had said his name, the concern, there was so much to the guy he just didn't know about.

After several moments, Steve let out a soft, breathy laugh against

Billy's neck. "I just remembered that I fucking lost....*King Billy.*"

Billy blinked and looked down at Steve, until, well, *fuck*, Steve called him King Billy and suddenly his head was reeling and his stomach was pooling with heat and--oh god. He sucked in a sharp breath and tightened his hold in Steve's hair. "Yeah, buddy, you lost." He mused, but his tone was almost dead. He wanted to kiss Steve so badly, but he also didn't want to be killed with a damn bat. He looked down, enraptured by Steve's eyes, and tried hard not to give into his desires.

Fuck. Him.

So what if Harrington ended up hating him? It wasn't like they didn't hate each other before. If he hated him for what he was about to do, so what? They'd go back to hating each other, throwing punches, snarling, and general disregard for one another at school. He could take the risk, right? Find out if it was... okay? Because in this little shit town in Indiana, who was he to say that he couldn't... try?

Billy moved his arm from Steve's waist so that he could cup his jaw. "Fucking christ, Steve," He murmured, his voice thick with what he assumed was lust. "Y'really shouldn't say that right now. I can't..." His eyes dropped to Steve's mouth. His full lips. The way they were parted to bring in air, and Billy was fucked. He grit his teeth, threw caution to the wind, and leaned in enough to press his lips against Steve's.

Now it was a matter of time before Steve threw that baseball bat into Billy's skull.

There was only a brief moment that Steve was still, felt Billy press against his body even more, and then suddenly his lips were on him. Maybe the moment felt longer to Billy, but as far as kisses went, it was downright chaste, and it felt unsure, and so unlike Billy Hargrove.

The truth was that Steve didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know what he was doing when he relentlessly pursued Nancy Wheeler, didn't know what he was doing being dragged with Dustin and the little shits, and he really didn't know what he was doing with Billy fucking Hargrove.

But he trusted that electricity. There was just something about it that had never steered him wrong. It was a current that he just knew to follow to the source, and even if it hurt him, deeply fucking hurt him, he never regretted following it. And with that, he slide his hands up Billy Hargrove's back, and parted his lips ever so slightly as he gently sighed into his mouth and kissed Billy deeply back. His fingers pressed hard into Billy's back, encouraging him, as he closed his eyes tightly and sucked his lower lip.

The last thing Billy expected was for Steve to kiss back. He was ready for the bat, for a fist, but not for Steve's lips. He sucked in a sharp, surprised breath as Steve returned what little pressure he put on him and he muffled his surprised noise into Harrington's mouth. Steve wasn't even *drunk* and he was kissing Billy back, finding his lower lip, sucking on him, and Billy wanted to roll over and shove Steve into the mattress. Billy was the type to take and take and never give, but he was hesitant with Steve, careful. And he somewhat hated himself for it.

"Steve," Billy shuddered and tried to sound reasonable. It didn't work. "Princess, Jesus..." He hissed as Steve sucked on his lower lip

and tried to control the urge to dominate the teen. He moved his hand from Steve's hair to his jaw and finally parted their lips. Instead, he stroked his thumb over Steve's lower lip and opened his eyes just enough to gaze at him. "Y'sure about this, princess? If you are, I'm a-okay. But I don't... shit, I don't want to make you feel like you have to..." His breath hitched as he looked at Steve's lips--swollen from *their* kissing.

Nancy had no fucking idea what she left behind, and Billy was suddenly glad that Steve lost his king status.

Steve was breathing a little harder as he looked at Billy's face, at his uncertainty. It wasn't a look that he thought Billy shared with a lot of people, and it made him look even younger than he already was. Steve let out a little breathless laugh at Billy's concern, as if Billy had somehow pressured him into this. It was strange, sure, but Steve had enough going on in his life that this was barely registering. This is what he wanted, for sure.

"It seems like, I'm the one making the King speechless here, is that all it took Hargrove?" And then Steve was kissing Billy again, sliding his hand into his hair and slowly arching against his body. This wasn't going to fix his life, and not fix his relationship with Billy, but maybe it could be the start of something great. No matter what happened between him and Nancy, she made him better, and he could just sense that there was something there in Billy Hargrove, way more than anybody else gave him credit for.

Billy was going to reply, going to say something snarky and awful, and then Steve took the initiative and kissed him. His mind suddenly became hazy, and not only from the kiss. No, Steve was *arching into him*. He was using his body to grind against Billy and he was lost, so completely utterly lost. He breathed in Steve--his scent, his body, his

need, and Billy was so fucking lost he couldn't think straight. He moved enough to tangle his fingers into Steve's hair, to hold him, as he returned the kiss just as fervently as he was receiving it. His breath was harsh against Steve's lips, his body taut with tension. This wasn't something he had expected in the little town of Hawkins, Indiana.

Steve fucking Harrington wasn't something he had expected, but here he was, kissing him and hoping for more than he could wish for.

Billy parted his own lips to dip his tongue over the seam of Steve's, prying and pushing for permission to deepen the kiss. He moved his arm down to Steve's waist to run his fingers down his spine, along the prominent ridges, before he found the hem of his shirt. He slipped his fingers beneath it for just a moment, just to touch his skin, to feel him, and he bit back a groan as he fought the urge to roll his hips against Steve.

How the fuck had the night of pizza and beer end like this? Billy wasn't complaining, fuck no, but he also didn't want Steve to see him as some sort of.. Escape, when he wanted to be so much more than that.

Steve moaned softly into his mouth, and he hated how needy he sounded, but when Billy's tongue touched his own, he felt that spark and felt reassured. He sucked on Billy's tongue slowly, and let out a small whine when Billy refused to move, he could feel him holding back. And it pissed him off. They had both started something here and he wasn't about to let Billy's insecurities stop this.

Steve pressed closer and used his free hand to push up Billy's half-open shirt and gently touch his stomach. He felt the hard abdominals

flexing there, different from what he was used to, very different, but no less intoxicating.

He felt Billy's fingers at his back, pressing hard into the muscles and Billy was just so fucking warm. He moaned again into Billy's mouth, his brow furrowing, and it felt like Billy was on fire, making Steve catch on fire he was so hot, and Steve hissed a little as he felt those fingers press a little harder, not realizing he had whispered as much in Billy's mouth.

Billy had always been in control-*always*. To feel Steve take some initiative made his body run too hot, and he tried to pull back--he did--but as Steve pressed closer and his mouth opened, Billy finally let himself relax. He dipped his tongue into Steve's mouth, along his teeth, his tongue, tasting and claiming absolutely everything he could. The way Steve acted earlier worried him, so he didn't roll on top of him like he'd wanted to, staying on his side and letting Steve direct and control. It was the only way he knew how to give Steve choice, and he didn't want to push him.

"Princess," Billy gasped into Steve's mouth. Steve's hand on his stomach, his *bare* stomach, made his entire body harden. Muscles went taut and he hissed. Sure, the pain was there, but so was the pleasure, and that outweighed the pain so much so that Billy felt dizzy. Fine. If fucking Harrington wanted this, he'd give it.

Without much apology, Billy tilted their position so he was straddling Steve's waist. He slid his fingers over Steve's stomach, on top of his shirt, before he went ahead and tugged off his own. His bruises glimmered in the glow of Steve's lights, but he didn't give a fuck. He had Steve, and it was shitty of him, but he wanted to take advantage of that before Steve realized what he was doing--*if*--he realized. He leaned down again to capture Steve's lips, ignoring the clawing of his

own demons to *run*.

Steve rolled slightly as Billy moved and straddled him. Steve's legs were slightly parted and he settled back into the bed, watched Billy quickly take off his shirt. He could see the bruises of course, but he knew he would make time for that later, make time to ask him and fuck, if Billy let him, tell him it would be okay too. Steve wanted to make sure of that.

He slid his hand up Billy's stomach slowly to his chest, it was really fucking unfair how built the guy was, and he fucking knew it too. Steve reached down and removed his own t shirt, slightly arching his pelvis forward as he did so and hissed as his groin came in contact with Billy's. Shit, he was hard, really fucking hard. Steve chucked his shirt to the side of the room and suddenly felt really embarrassed and underdressed. Nobody had fucking looked at him the way Billy Hargrove was in that instant.

Steve was left in just his underwear and Billy was still wearing his pants. Steve wanted to make some sort of quip that what's fair is fair before he remembered Billy didn't wear any underwear and Billy's earlier taunt of giving a Steve a show floated back to him, caused him to flush a deep red.

Billy held still as Steve's hands ventured because he didn't want to scare him off. He didn't want Steve to realize that what he was doing was wrong, and that the way Billy's muscles rippled and tensed as he moved over his skin was *sinful*. He parted his lips and groaned, clenching his hands into fists to try and control himself. Steve, hair messy and face relaxed, made him want to lose control. Not in the way he had destroyed his face. No. Billy wanted to take him apart, bit by bit, piece by piece, until he was sobbing and begging and *pleading* Billy to let him come.

And suddenly Steve's shirt was gone, and Billy was memorizing every line, every dip of Steve's chest and his stomach, down to the waistline of his underwear. His eyes were a torrent blue, like the ocean, soaking Steve up and refusing to let him go. "Shit, Steve. You're... fucking--beautiful..." And Billy felt heat rise in his own cheeks because he wasn't so much a talker, more of a doer, and Steve was putting him in positions he had never been before.

The blonde teen moved back just a smidgen to place a hand over Steve's hip, to keep him from rocking against him, because if he continued to do that, Billy would lose his fucking mind and Steve was *so not ready* for that. He kept a hand firmly on Steve's hipbone while he grinned. His necklace dangled off of him, touching Steve's chest, and Billy wondered vaguely if Steve could feel it.

"What do you want, princess?" Steve's face made Billy want to do it, just because, but he wanted to *hear it*. "Tell me. What do you want?"

Steve bit his lower lip hard as he slowly touched Billy, sliding his hands slowly and gently over the hard planes of Billy's body. Steve felt the strength and the power there and it made his own stomach clench in excitement. He was impossibly hard and Steve moved one of legs up, nudging at Billy's hip as the blonde held his down, trying to bump Billy forward, just to get him to fucking move.

The way that Billy was looking at him...he never had anybody look at him like that, with this pure desire and want. Billy *wanted* him. Steve had sex several times before, and the better he got at it, the more he had enjoyed it. But no girl had ever looked at him like that and he couldn't recall ever feeling this way with a girl, not even Nancy Wheeler. He hadn't been joking when he said that Billy had lit him

on fire, there was no other way to describe how he was feeling.

And when Billy called him beautiful, he couldn't help but loudly laugh. He expected Billy to make some sort of joke-call him hideous a moment later, because it was ridiculous and he really didn't think of himself that way. When Billy didn't laugh or insult him, the laughter died on the tip of Steve's tongue. He flushed even deeper in embarrassment, could feel it on his cheeks, and he was unsure what Billy saw in him when he looked the way he did. He felt so completely out of his element, and while that terrified him, he wasn't about to leave the fire that was Billy Hargrove.

Billy held him down and Steve tested that strength for just a moment, tried to arch his hips up, but Billy's hold was firm. It did something to him, that same want overtaking him and lighting him on fire as his breath quickened and he settled for writhing under Billy. He needed a release of that goddamn friction, because it wasn't just that he was hard, it was Billy who was fucking unraveling him.

Steve licked his lips and he was too far gone to care about the nickname, too needy in that moment as Billy watched him, asked him what he wanted. Steve tried to arch up on the bed again, meet and melt his body into Billy's, kiss him again, but the blonde was having none of it as he let out a breathless, frustrated moan.

"Please I just-I just want you to fucking touch me—!"

Billy was aware of Steve's struggle, of his need to move, to grind, to feel skin on skin contact, and he was going to keep that from him. The desperation in Steve's eyes, his muscles, his hips as they pushed against his hand made his blood pump hot. He licked his lips and grinned, wickedly, as he held Steve in place. Who knew that a

decision over beers and pizza would get him in Steve's bed, *and* that it would be more than soothing him.

The idea that Steve had been panicking only moments ago made Billy pause. He didn't want this to happen because Steve wanted him to stay. That wasn't why Billy was doing it. That wasn't why, sitting on top of Steve, his own skin felt too tight to be in. No, Billy wanted Steve. He had wanted him since the moment he laid eyes on him; he just didn't know that *this* was what he wanted more (instead of punching his face in).

Steve's moans were going to kill him, though. That Billy knew. He loved the way Steve's lips parted, how low the noise was, deep and eager and full of want. His eyes glittered as he took in Steve's body. Sculpted, but nothing like his own, lithe and lean with muscle. Billy loved it. He leaned down close enough to kiss Steve while settling his damaged hand next to Steve's head.

"Yeah? Touch you? How d'ya want me to do that, Steve?" Billy slid the hand that had been pinning Steve's hip to his stomach. He slid his blunt nails over the skin first and then cupped his side. "I can't do anything if I don't know what the pretty boy wants." Billy was taunting him. He knew that, but this was Billy, and he was an *asshole*. If Steve wanted something, he'd have to ask, to beg, and Billy wouldn't have it any other way.

To kindle the fire between their bodies, Billy shifted just enough so that he could press his hips against Steve's. His own cock, heavy with whatever the fuck he felt for Steve, pushed against Steve's. Billy managed to not moan, but his grin had dropped and his lips had parted. Damn, but that felt good. How long had it been since he had actually gone to bed with another guy?

Too fucking long.

Steve tried to kiss him deeply, nipped at Billy's lower lip as he tried to arch up as Billy held him in place. He groaned in frustration, it was fucking unfair is what it was, and he knew exactly what Billy was doing. He had never had to voice what he wanted, things just happened and he assumed most of the control. He honestly didn't know what to really say and it both pissed him off and embarrassed him.

Billy clearly knew what he wanted, just wasn't giving it to him, and he shuddered hard as Billy fucking teased him. And Steve didn't want to take that, be the only one here going crazy.

Steve looked at Billy's face, his ridiculously beautiful face, as he panted softly, his breath fanning over the blonde. Steve may totally be out of his element, but he was also really enjoying this challenge, enjoyed being pushed by Billy, because if nothing else he was going push back.

"Wherever my King wants to touch me, please--fucking kiss me too--" It was embarrassing in a way that stoked that fire, and he couldn't stop himself from writhing under Billy, kept trying to buck under his hold, break Billy just as much as he was breaking Steve. When Billy finally pressed his hips against Steve's, he loudly moaned and he felt deeply embarrassed by how needy he sounded. He was used to being quieter, things slow, and the fact that he was really enjoying this on such an intense level was almost too much to handle. Steve covered his flushed face for a moment, trying to control his breathing and the noises coming out of him.

“Dangerous territory there, princess,” Billy warned, but his voice was thick with lust. He rolled his hips again, grinding against Steve because he *loved* the noises that the teen was making. He loved that Steve was unravelling, gasping and whining beneath him. He loved the look in his eyes and how his back arched in desperation. He finally, *finally* let Steve’s side go, allowing him to move. He only did it to grab Steve’s wrist, though, pulling his hand away from his face.

“How can I kiss you if you’re doing that?” Billy murmured. He took Steve’s jaw in his hand and tilted his face up. “C’mon now, pretty boy.” He pressed their lips together and he was *hungry* for Steve. He didn’t wait for permission or a go-ahead, pushing his tongue passed Steve’s lips and into his mouth. He moved his good hand from Steve’s jaw to his hair and tangled his fingers there, holding him still as he took full advantage of his mouth.

Billy was really fucking tempted to simply grab Steve’s cock, but the hand he wanted to do it with was injured (thanks, Steve). He groaned into Steve’s mouth and rolled his hips forward again, allowing himself to finally make some noise. After all, he doubted Steve was going to come back to him after tonight. He would realize what fucked up mistake he had made and Billy would be alone again.

When he finally pulled back from Steve, actually *panting*, he glanced over Steve’s body and hissed. “Take those off,” He looked back up to Steve, daring him not to follow the command.

Steve arched into Billy, arched into their kiss with a deep moan. He sucked Billy’s tongue hard and it was wet, and loud, and fucking *obscene*, and Steve hated that he was losing himself. He would feel it happening, how little he cared about anything but being touched by Billy Hargrove. And as much as he was clawing for some semblance of control, Billy kept ripping it away from him.

When Billy pressed their hips together and actually fucking moved, he heard himself crying out and it was difficult to recognize that those noises were coming from him. He had lifted one leg and thrown it over Billy's ass, rocking into the sensations and craved more. When Billy stopped, he could have punched the guy, but he saw that Billy was excited too, struggling to keep a hold of this situation.

He dimly heard the order to take off his underwear, he hesitated for a moment. Not because he didn't want this, because he couldn't think of anything more he ever wanted in that fucking moment, but because Billy would be able to see him--really fucking see him.

Showering with the guy in a locker room was one thing, everybody did their business and went on with their lives, and despite the nudity, people weren't *looking* at each other. Steve evaluated what he wanted for just a moment, but the decision was painfully clear from the start. He couldn't ask Billy not to look at him, because for one thing Steve thought it sounded way too feminine, but also because he knew it was what Billy really wanted.

Steve let out a long, shuddering breath of embarrassment and felt his cheeks fucking heating up even more as he hooked his fingers under the elastic and pushed down the Calvins, jostling slightly against Billy who was both watching him and still half on top of him. It was quiet, so fucking quiet, and Steve had to stop himself from putting his arms over his face as he quietly groaned and his gaze drifted to the ceiling for a moment.

Billy could see Steve thinking. He could see that he was contemplating what was happening and a part of him was terrified that Steve would stop this--that it would end here and Billy would go

home, fucking alone. He hadn't even realized that his muscles were taut before Steve finally wiggled out of his underwear. His body began to relax again and he let out a shaky breath. Even with Steve's leg over his hip, Billy hadn't been sure what Steve was planning.

"Christ, princess," Billy muttered. "Give me a damned heart attack." He leaned down and pressed a light kiss to the tip of Steve's nose. Damn asshole. He shifted back and sat on his knees so he could look. His eyes roamed over Steve's stomach, his hip bones, his thighs, and then finally his cock. It was full, hard, and Billy's stomach clenched.

This is what Billy wanted, and he was a damned idiot for realizing this so far into the game with Steve. The entire thing could have been different. He clenched his jaw at that thought and then shook it off. Fuck that. He had Steve now, and he wasn't about to leave him there, either. He glanced up at Steve's face and licked his lips.

"I don't know why you're embarrassed, Steve. You're fucking beautiful," Billy's grin dropped to a smile and he leaned down to press his lips to Steve's right hipbone. He licked the skin and then sucked, making sure that, by the time he let the skin go, there would be a mark there. *His* mark.

Steve was really shocked when Billy kissed his nose and all he could do was blink. It was so soft a gesture and so unlike what he thought of Billy, but then again so had been the entire evening. He wanted more of that, wanted to see more of the real Billy Hargrove that he kept hidden from everybody else. 'Everybody but me,' and his pride and ego swelled a little at thought.

When Billy was evaluating his body, he did his best not to squirm or clear this throat, but it was really uncomfortable. Plenty of people

had seen him naked, Nancy had seen him naked, but there was a big difference between seeing and *looking*.

And when Billy called him beautiful, yet again, he did his best not to contradict Billy. He didn't think the blonde would appreciate it, no matter how uncomfortable and (weirdly) simultaneously pleasant it made him feel. One of his hands clenched at the bed sheets under him, twisting it slightly as Billy kissed him, but when Billy started to suck, he let out a startled gasp, twisted the sheet harder as he bit his lower lip to muffle the noises he wanted to make.

Billy didn't mind that Steve didn't respond. His body did, and that was all that mattered to him at this point. He kissed the spot he had sucked on, knowing that it would probably ache later on, and then kissed a line to the trail of light hair that led directly to where he wanted to go. At first, Billy just breathed over Steve's cock, letting him feel how his own breath stuttered, how excited he was to touch him like this.

How long had it been? Billy was a bit dizzy. A long time. Shit. He slid his fingers around the base of Steve's cock and held him. His injured hand moved to hold Steve's hip. It hurt, but he didn't give a fuck. Instead, he concentrated on the rush he got from parting his lips and swiping his tongue over the head of Steve's cock. Then he was done--teasing was done--and Billy was opening his mouth and taking in as much of Steve's cock into his throat as possible. He sucked and swallowed, as if he was starved for it, and drug his tongue along the underside of him.

At the same time, his injured hand clutched Steve's hip, his nails biting into the pale skin while his mouth worked. *This* is what Billy wanted, what he had aimed for, and Steve tasted just as hot and heady as he thought he would.

Steve half sat up, turned his gaze down to watch Billy, his cheeks darkly flushed as he squirmed on the sheets. He bit his lower lip as he watched him, watched Billy take in his body. One of his hands traveled down and gently touched Billy's hair, tangled his fingers in those soft curls as he whimpered softly and bit down harder on his lip.

He could see the mark but couldn't even bring himself to care, he allowed Billy to mark him yet again and he wanted to see it too, even if he wouldn't voice it. Steve knew it meant something, sensed it meant something for Billy and in turn, he found that it meant something for him too--even if he wasn't comfortable voicing that yet either.

He let out a soft curse when Billy swiped his tongue over his cock, and that had been what he expected before Billy suddenly took him into his mouth. Steve's eyes opened wide for a moment before he tightly closed them and loudly shouted. It was nothing like what he sounded like earlier, no, his voice was filled with pleasure and surprise that Billy was doing this to him, and Jesus Christ, what the fuck was Billy doing to him!

Steve half-yelled and cursed as his fingers tightened in his hair, tried not to pull on the curls there. "Ahh fuck--*fuck*--! B-Billy--!" He closed his eyes tightly, and yanked at the sheets under him with his other hand. Steve arched his hips and raised his legs, his toes digging into the bed as he panted.

The thrill of Steve's cry made Billy groan. He couldn't help how his own body responded, how he pushed his cock against the bed because it ached in response to Steve's writhing. He closed his eyes

and ignored the urge to gag as he slid his lips further down, down down until he couldn't anymore. He swallowed once and then pulled up slowly. His eyes had burned, some tears collecting at the sides, and he ignored the fuck out of it because he was taking Steve's cock into his mouth again, sucking and massaging the hot skin with his tongue.

Billy didn't mind that Steve's hand was in his hair. He *liked* it, in fact. He would never admit it to anyone, but sometimes, giving up control was a serious turn on for him. Being in control all the fucking time became exhausting, and this was simply *good* for him. He opened his eyes and looked up at Steve through his lashes.

As he finally let go of Steve's cock with a perverse pop, Billy chuckled. He licked his lips slowly and looked over Steve's body. He was contemplating his next move. Let Steve finish in his mouth? See if he'd go a little further? He leaned down and pressed his lips to the tip of Steve's cock.

"How d'you wanna come, baby?" Billy slid his tongue over the underside of Steve's cock and groaned. "Tell me. How d'you wanna come?"

Steve writhed on the bed, in disbelief that Billy was doing this to him, he had never had a fucking blowjob like this before. He was cursing and crying out and barely in his own body. He felt like he couldn't control anything that was happening to him and when the fuck did Billy learn how to do this, how the fuck was he so fucking good at it!

He let out another cry when Billy released his cock, his whole body vibrating from what had happened as he panted, struggled to come to

his senses as his stomach clenched hard. Steve knew he was wrecked because that was how he felt. His entire body was on fire, and he struggled to open his eyes as Billy asked him that question. He looked down at the blonde, tried to think of something to say, fucking anything to say.

It was downright perverse and fuck if it didn't turn him on even more. He made no comment at the baby remark, shit he couldn't even begin to care about that if it meant Billy kept doing what he was doing. But he was out of his element. He never had sex with a man before and definitely never had sex with a woman like this before.

He shook his head a little and tried to find his voice. How did he want to come? How many ways were there? "I don't....I don't--Jesus Billy whatever you want to do to me, I'll--" Steve swallowed hard, did that mean Billy wanted to have sex with him? And was he going to let it happen?

Billy watched Steve try to think coherently, and it was hilarious, but it was also settling. He knew that he didn't want to take it too far with Steve. Not tonight, and that meant that he planned on doing this again. He planned on being above Steve, of owning him, again, but right now, he wanted Steve to *remember* him. He wanted him to think about him whenever he jacked it. He wanted Steve to blush when they saw each other in the halls. He wanted him to remember how good Billy's mouth is whenever he licked his lips.

"You're ridiculous," Billy mused and shook his head. "I'll suck you off, princess," he wrapped his fingers around Steve's cock and stroked it a few times. "Bet you'd like that. Comin' down my throat," he grinned and felt his own cock twitch at the idea of having Steve come in his mouth. He moved his mouth back to Steve's cock and parted

his lips. He leaned down further so he could take most of Steve into his mouth, down his throat, and he sucked again, relishing at the way Steve moved and made noises.

Billy was going to make Steve come. And then he was going to make him sleep, and he'd fucking sleep in his arms and he'd be *safe*.

Steve never felt more dumbfounded than he did in that moment, and he struggled to think, to talk, to do something other than just take what Billy was doing to him. But it was basically impossible, it felt like Billy was changing him, making him into something new. He wished he could be as smooth as Billy somehow still was, which somewhat infuriated Steve because he was certainly *losing*, but whatever Billy was doing to him had filled him up inside, consumed him.

Steve licked his lips as Billy stroked him, his hand was so much bigger than what he was used to, bigger than a girl's and bigger than his own. He had also never come down anybody's throat before. Steve always tried to be a considerate lover, and doing something like that to somebody--it didn't seem considerate. He had always pulled away, directed a hand, something else, but the prospect of coming down Billy's throat really did fucking turn him on. It made his cock twitch and when Billy's mouth was back, he moaned out, "Shit--Billy, you don't--fuck fuck fuck--!"

His toes curled again as he struggled on the bed, getting close. He wished he could make this last a long time, felt a little like it was going to be embarrassingly brief, but Hargrove's fucking mouth was bringing him down hard.

"Shit, fuck--Billy no, I'm really gonna, you can't--goddamn it--" Part of

him thought it was humiliating and he didn't want to do that to Billy, wanted to give him chance to back out, but Billy wasn't moving. One hand tightened hard on the curls, the other grabbing for his blanket and twisted it as he closed his eyes, screamed out then, arched his back and pelvis forward as far as he could with Billy holding him down as he came hard. Steve could see stars behind his eyes as his whole body shook.

Billy refused to budge, even as Steve babbled at him. He wasn't going to let this get away from him. He was going to take Steve, all of him, and he was going to watch him explode and fall apart. He sucked as hard as he could until Steve was shouting, taut and shaking and *perfect*. Billy felt the first ropes hit the back of his throat and he was swallowing, taking everything Steve could give him without complaint. When he was done and sure that Steve was a trembling mess of nothing, he pulled his lips off of his cock.

With a grin, Billy sat back and licked his lips. "Pretty like that, princess," he managed, his voice rough--both from his throat being filled and from his own want. He licked his lips again, as if to emphasize how happy he was with it, and slid up Steve's body. He let his injured hand stay on the bed and ran the other through Steve's hair. While Steve shook, he looked over his body. Sweaty, flushed with pleasure, his lips all parted and swollen from kissing. This is how he wanted Steve from this point forward. Sure, that meant no more fist fights (or did it?), but Billy could handle that.

"Y'okay?" Billy was teasing him again, his lips twisted into a wicked smirk as he left Steve's hair to run his fingers up and down Steve's chest and stomach. "Never had this before, have you?" He laughed. There was no spite or meanness in his question, but girls simply didn't do it as well as boys did.

Steve felt weightless, there was no other way to describe it. Everything had been pushed out of his mind, his family, his responsibilities, the fucking Upside-Down and demogorgons, all of it, and it was because of Billy fucking Hargrove.

He knew that Billy was talking to him again, and he was struggled to find his own voice, his body still trembled from his orgasm. When Billy's hand was in his hair, he turned his head slightly, his nose touching the skin there, smelling Billy. He felt the hand leave his hair, touch his stomach which clenched a little. His touch burned, Billy Hargrove was eating him alive.

He wasn't even thinking for a moment when he grabbed Billy's hand, bringing it up to his own mouth as he kissed the inside of his wrist, softly sucking the skin there for just a brief moment in time. He wanted to thank him and couldn't think of any of the words, so instead he kissed along his hand and gently bit at the meat of Billy's palm. Of course he never had this before, never even knew something like that, like *this*, was possible.

Billy paused, surprised that Steve took his hand. He watched, and he didn't want to admit that he was transfixed by the way Steve moved his mouth over his skin. Then, Steve was sucking on him and he hissed because *fuck* that felt good. He swallowed and his cock twitched. He wasn't worried about himself, for once. He didn't give a fuck that he wasn't finishing or that he wasn't demanding completion from Steve. The loopy, glazed Steve was amazing to watch, and he was okay with that.

"What're you doin, princess," Steve's lips made his breath hitch again. Damn it. He settled his cheek against his own arm (the free one), and let Steve do whatever he'd like with the other. He wouldn't stop him, especially if he was curious about what the other teen was

doing. Hell, Steve didn't even have to answer. Billy was having a good enough time just watching him.

Then, of course, Steve bit his palm and Billy sucked in a sharp breath of air. He *liked* that. "Careful, Steve... it feels good," he warned with a breathy chuckle. He was reminded of his own cock, hard and throbbing against his stomach. But he didn't make any move to do anything. "I thought I exhausted you."

"You did, I'm just...." He wanted to say grateful, but it wasn't the right word, especially not after a blowjob. It almost sounded like saying thank you after somebody said they loved you. It was beyond grateful, it was beyond in debt. Billy had *helped* Steve, relaxed him more than he fucking felt in god knows how long, and it had been fucking amazing.

He had to level with Billy, "Look I...don't know what the fuck I'm doing but...what if I want you to feel good too? Is that...okay?" Steve looked into Billy's eyes and he swallowed, still kept his gaze there was he gently pressed his other hand to Billy's chest and ran it slowly down his stomach to his pants, purposely stopping there.

If he did something for Billy, it certainly wasn't going to feel the fucking same. To say that he was inexperienced was a gross understatement, and it wasn't even something he often had practiced with girls, most of them too embarrassed to have him go down on them. But this was also Billy's call, Billy's show. And no matter what Billy had done for him, he was asking Billy to be just a little vulnerable for Steve. And Steve felt like that just might be a big decision.

"Is it okay..?"

“Just...?” Billy prompted and then clicked his mouth shut as Steve’s hand wandered down his chest, to his stomach, to lie above the hem of his jeans. He hissed and felt all of his muscles clench, which caused the bruises to hurt, but he just couldn’t bring himself to care. He glanced down, surprised at how *hot* it looked to have Steve’s hand resting on his stomach, waiting for his go-ahead, his permission, to touch him. He glanced back up to Steve and licked his lips. It wasn’t his normal viciousness, either. It was right before his breath stuttered out between his parted lips and he did want more, and Steve was making it hard to say no.

“Yeah, uhm--yeah,” Billy swallowed again and shifted. He was already lying on his side, but he wanted to man-handle Steve. So, he did. He reached over and pulled Steve onto his side, so that they were facing each other, and reached down to grab Steve’s hand. “I can’t say no to you, princess,” Billy finally mused and moved his hand passed Steve’s to unbuckle his own jeans. Once he unzipped, because he was commando and he was *not* having Steve accidentally catching his skin, he brought his hand back up and, almost reluctantly, handed control over to Steve.

Steve watched Billy carefully and when he unzipped his pants, Steve launched himself again at Billy, just like he first did when they had laid down in bed after his night terror. One of his hands tangled in Billy’s hair as he kissed him deeply again and sucked his lower lip, asking Billy to open his own mouth. He could taste just a little bit of Billy’s facial hair, but he didn’t really care. His lips were full and he found that he really fucking enjoy kissing Billy.

He rested his hand on his stomach for a moment, knowing he was working up the nerve to actually touch Billy. He had never touched a guy like this before, but every guy had jerked off. This was something he knew how to do. His hand traveled lower, past a small patch of

hair to gently grip Billy's cock. He stroked him slowly, his thumb rubbing over the head and he could feel the precum there.

Steve gathered it slowly with his thumb as he rubbed the head, pressing slightly as he felt a little more leak out. At least this he could do, was familiar with, but he didn't just want to do the bare minimum. He really did want to make Billy feel good too.

Without another thought, he released Billy's cock and brought his thumb to his mouth. He wasn't even looking at Billy when he licked it, tasting the precum that was still there. He glanced back up at Billy, frowning a little. It didn't taste bad, exactly, just different and a little salty, but there was also some smell... "Dude, is that cologne?"

Billy grunted as Steve threw himself on him. He opened his mouth willingly for Steve to explore and let himself simply *enjoy* being touched. Being in control had always been important to him, so giving it up for Steve was a serious issue. Or, he thought it was, until Steve took it on himself to finally touch his cock. He twitched, hips stuttering forward and then moving back as he gasped a bit. He didn't moan or make any other noise. Hell, it wasn't noticeable except for the hitch in his breath.

When Steve brought his thumb up to lick the precum, Billy could have fucking lost it. He could have just exploded then, completely and utterly shocked by how willing Steve was to touch him, to try new things, to taste *him*. Shit. And then, of course, he asked about the cologne and Billy *lost it*. He threw his head back and laughed, loud and light. The laughter was belly-tight, making him shake as he tried to control it.

"S-sorry, princess," Billy gasped and then snickered. "Fuck. Uhm.

Yeah. Yeah, I do that. Why? Gotta problem with it?"

Steve blinked in surprise as Billy, laughed, really laughed, and it was....beautiful. He blinked before he joined him, laughing as well as he leaned forward again, their noses bumping. Steve smiled widely as he searched his eyes.

"No, it's fine, but...I'd probably just rather taste you." He kissed Billy again, long and slow before he was smiling against his lips. "Is that an everyday scent or were you expecting something?" Steve teased him. He certainly hadn't seen Billy do it after the locker room.

His hand travelled back down and he resumed stroking Billy, smiling as he looked at his face teasingly. He felt a little more in control. Steve still didn't know what the fuck he was doing, but Billy wasn't calling him a goddamn idiot or anything and he could feel the slow rock of Billy's hips. His tongue slid out for a moment and gently swiped across Billy's lips, a smile still on his own lips.

He could tell this was a big deal for Billy, even if Billy wouldn't tell him why. Steve really wanted him to like it, to open up a little bit to him, because Steve wasn't going to hurt him. Steve turned his wrist slowly, torqued his hand on every upstroke.

Billy's laughter only truly died down when Steve kissed him again. His body felt another stroke of heat as their lips moved together and then Steve was *smiling* against him and Billy had difficulty breathing. "That's some fuckin' line, princess." Billy's lids lowered and he watched Steve quietly for a moment. "And I had a date planned, thank you. Didn't pan out--kinda glad it didn't, actually."

And then Steve's tongue was on him and he shuddered. "Really don't

regret it,” Billy breathed. He tangled his hand into Steve’s ridiculous hair and tugged him forward, pushing their mouths together so he could taste Steve again. He rolled his hips forward, gasping into his mouth as Steve’s hand continued to move.

Billy wasn’t going to tell Steve what to do. The idea that Steve was exploring him, mapping him, touching a guy for the first time, was plenty fucking enough. He opened his eyes to look down at Steve again, his heart pumping against his chest as each of Steve’s stroking movements made his hips roll.

Steve wanted to ask whether it was with a man or woman, but they weren’t there yet, and it wasn’t really his place to ask. Steve moaned softly when Billy kissed him deeply again, groaned as he explored his mouth. He felt Billy slide his tongue against his lips and he leaned forward, greedily sucking again as he felt, more than heard, the soft noises that Billy was making. The guy was really quiet and he wanted to just *hear* that what he was doing was right.

He was the one moaning in his mouth as Billy held onto his hair, he moved his hand faster as he heart thudded in his chest. Steve was sure he could do it, not nearly as well but, he put his hand on Billy’s shoulder for a moment and pushed him gently but firmly down onto the bed. His cheeks were bright red again and he was quiet for a moment, a little too quiet as he evaluated his options. He knew Billy was watching him when he suddenly scooted down.

He was still flushed but Steve had a determined look about him as he glanced at Billy’s face. “Just don’t--I mean, it’s not going to be....” Not going to be nearly as good, but he bent over and slowly swiped his tongue over the head of Billy’s cock, licking slowly and deliberately.

Billy was a bit more surprised than he'd like to admit when Steve moved back and gently pushed him to the bed. He watched, curious, as Steve seemed to think and contemplate something. Then, oh fuck, Steve was leaning down and his mouth was over him and Billy was *fucked*. He hissed and clenched his hand in an effort to not just grab him. He settled his hands on the bed, instead, and twisted his fingers in the sheets.

"Do what ya want, princess," Billy took in a slow breath and glanced over Steve's face. He wasn't going to rush the guy. He wasn't going to force him to do anything he didn't want to. If Steve tried and decided it wasn't for him, that was fine, he could accept that, but he would suffer afterward with a serious case of blueballs. He winced at the thought and licked his lips.

At some point, Billy really needed to figure out what this was. Because, in his head, he saw himself doing this with Steve on the regular, and he wasn't even sure Steve was up for that. He shook off the thought and reached down to slide his fingers through Steve's hair.

Steve wanted to think he was capable of taking down Billy Hargrove, but he was just being so fucking too cool for school on him. If anything Steve knew that since he hadn't done this, he was more than a little surprised to find himself *liking* it. Hopefully Billy liked it enough to enjoy it, he couldn't do the same things as the blonde for sure.

When Billy slide his fingers in his hair, he turned his head. He wasn't about to tell Billy how much he liked that, but he suspected that Billy may have known. He stroked him just a little as he turned up his

head and softly bit a few times at his hand, at Billy's fingertips. He kissed the groove between his thumb and pointer finger before he sucked once, his face still flushed as he released the hand and bent back over. This time he took the head in his mouth.

It wasn't really comfortable and he really had to be mindful of his teeth, but he stroked the lower half of Billy's cock as he sucked slowly but hard. He wanted Billy to come too, wanted to see the blonde relaxed just like when they had been drunk and having a good time.

Billy hadn't been close until Steve began to nibble along his fingers, kiss along the grooves, and then *sucked* on his hand. He couldn't believe how much heat it threw his way, how his cock twitched and ached, how he was desperate for Steve to just fucking do it already. When that hot mouth found him, he dropped his head back and moaned. His knees parted and his back arched. He could feel the muscles of his stomach contract and his hips lift, but he tried really fucking hard not to simply fuck Steve's mouth. Instead, he tangled his fingers back into his hair and gripped them tightly. He was careful not to pull or hurt Steve, but he held on, gasping out little moans as Steve continued to just suck and stroke him.

"Wait--fuck, Steve," Billy didn't mind swallowing cum. He had nothing against it, but he couldn't imagine Steve doing it. He jerked his injured hand down and tapped Steve's cheek, a gentle warning. "Baby, you can't... I'm so close and y'don't... *fuck*..." Billy rolled his hips and dug his heels into the bed. If Steve didn't move, he *was* going to come down his throat, and *that* thought almost made him do it, his vision beginning to blur as pleasure shot up and down his spine. "Up, baby--*fuck*--"

But Steve held firm, refusing his move his head as he looked up at

Billy, his cheeks still flushed a deep red. He wanted to do this for Billy, what's fair is fair, not to mention that seeing Billy unravel even a little stirred him deeply.

So instead of moving his head away he reached his hand out, grabbing Billy's injured hand and not pressing his palm hard there but interlocking their fingers and squeezing around them gently. Steve didn't even care that Billy called him baby, even though it was very different and felt more...intimate. He wondered if that was what Billy intended or if he even intended anything at all as he got close.

Steve curled his tongue and pressed the flat of his tongue to Billy's cock, against the slit there as he refused to move. He was going to do this for Billy, he *wanted* to do this for Billy. And rendering the Billy Hargrove weak and speechless was fast becoming his new favorite thing.

That was it for Billy. The soft refusal to move, the twining of their fingers, the way Steve's tongue moved over the head of his cock. He spasmed, his spine bowing and his mind blissing out as he came into *Steve fucking Harrington's throat*. His moan was obscene, louder than he remembered being, and he couldn't give two shits. He rode his orgasm, his fingers twitching and his body trembling as wave after wave crashed into him.

The hand that had been in Steve's hair had tightened marginally and then fell slack. His chest rose and fell sharply with his breathing, his mind completely gone as he tried his best to come back from what he could assume was one of the best orgasms he had had in a long fucking time.

And it was given to him by a teen who had never done it before. Billy

was in trouble.

Steve jerked a little as Billy started to come down his throat, more from surprise than anything. Billy had warned him but warning somebody and actually feeling and tasting it was totally different. It was hot and he did his best to swallow it quickly until Billy stopped coming. He pulled his mouth away slowly and licked his lips. His jaw felt a little sore but he was amazed to watch Billy.

Watching him orgasm was hotter than he expected and he....he had done that. He was still holding Billy's hand and he didn't let it go, feeling a little nervous as he slide back up, searching his face. It had been okay, right? Billy wouldn't have come otherwise? But then again, he had come before when some girl had given him a shitty blowjob. Steve felt out of place, out of his league, but there was another part that wanted to learn more, do more, if Billy would let him. Steve chewed his lower lip softly as he laid down beside him.

This was actually something he could get used to. When Billy wasn't being a giant asshole, he enjoyed his presence, even before they started any of this shit--whatever it was. And what they had done...he was already thinking about when they could do it again, when they could touch each other again.

"I can do better...next time."

Billy didn't catch on that their fingers were still laced together until Steve was practically hovering over him. But he couldn't bring himself to care. He was still vibrating from his orgasm and breathing in so that he didn't suffocate. When he finally felt some semblance of normal, he tilted his head and looked up at Steve. He glanced over his eyes, his lips, the way his cheeks flushed, and realized he had

come in the guy's throat. He shuddered and licked his lips.

"Next time, princess?" Billy seemed bewildered because he *was*. No one really stuck around him, and he was sort of an asshole and made sure it was that way. So, the idea that Steve wanted to be around him *still* made his head spin. "Uhm, yeah. Yeah. Definitely. Come here..." He turned onto his side and held one arm out. "Y'should be able to sleep pretty fuckin' well tonight, pretty boy."

Steve laughed lightly and felt this massive relief wash over him. Billy wanted to do this again too, well that he could handle. He leaned against the blonde and gently wrapped his arm around him. He was mindful of the bruises and he really wanted to ask about them--but it wasn't the right time. Steve knew that even though the anxiety wormed around in his stomach.

Steve didn't tuck his head down just yet, instead he was looking over his face, specifically his eyes. He spoke softly, "I already told you, it's you, not me, *blue eyes*." Steve smiled at him warmly as he looked over his face, enjoying his moment with Billy. And the fact that Billy was still worried about him sleeping--it made him both happy and sad. The fact that Billy was concerned meant he wasn't the asshole he always tried to present himself to be, but he also wouldn't be able to tell him about those things that happened. And if they kept doing this, he was going to have more nightmares, and Billy was going to have to see that, have questions about that, and he didn't want him to get hurt. Steve frowned, a little lost in his thoughts as he tucked one curl behind Billy's ear.

Billy rolled his eyes and laughed at the comment about his eyes. "Blue as the ocean," he replied easily and then paused. He was surprised at the look Steve gave him--a mix between concerned and hopeful. It did weird things to his gut and he wasn't sure that he

liked that. In fact, it sort of freaked him out. He was about to ask what was up, to demand what was on Steve's mind, when the guy tucked one of his stray curls behind his ear. His questions died in his throat and he sighed.

"You're thinking too hard again, Steve," Billy mused. "Go to sleep, okay? You can think in the morning. Plenty of daylight for that." He reached down where the covers had ended up and tugged them up and over their bodies. "I told you I'd give you tonight, princess, and I'm giving that to you." He wrapped an arm around Steve's waist and tugged him flush against his body. "Now. Sleep, 'cause I need it, too." He tucked his chin on top of Steve's head and gazed at the wall. Lights. Baseball bats riddled with nails. Secrets. He closed his eyes and sighed. Not his place to ask.

Steve squeezed his waist once softly, blinking slowly as he breathed Billy in, his eyes searching. He knew that he was asking for a lot, they both...had something going on. But he also knew that he didn't just want tonight and he wasn't about to let Billy Hargrove pull away from him and act like he did the night of the Byers. He could tell that Billy didn't want to be that way, wasn't that way deep down, but the guy had demons.

Well, fuck it. So did Steve.

Steve felt that exhaustion overtaking him again and was really glad tomorrow was a Saturday. "Night, King Billy." His tone was heavy with sleep but light and teasing as he pressed one soft kiss to Billy's neck and finally closed his eyes. Steve was asleep within moments.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

This is Mel's fault. I enjoyed all of it, but Mel is the one who completed this chapter on a note that made my heart break.

Just fyi.

Part 4

Billy watched Steve fall asleep. He was sure that Steve needed it, and he stayed there, nestled against Steve, until around six in the morning. When he woke, he was drowsy and his head throbbed. Right. He needed to get home. The sooner the better. He blinked several times to try and wake himself up and then looked down at Steve. Shit. Right. They had... He swallowed and sighed. Right. Slowly, Billy eased up slowly, untangling himself from Steve.

Of course, Billy didn't leave without rummaging to find Steve's backpack. He found a piece of paper and a pen and scribbled a short note on it. After dropping it on Steve's nightstand, he watched him for a moment. Jesus. He felt weird. He shook his head and then left the large house with the larger personality inside.

The Camaro's engine didn't even calm him down as he roared down the road, nervous as fuck about his future run in with his pops. He figured it may go roughly. Or it may not go at all. Sometimes Neil got angry with him, sometimes he acted like he didn't exist. It was always a toss up. A coin flip, and as Billy rolled the car into the

driveway, he was *really* hoping for the coin to be on his side.

The house was silent, all three of them could still be asleep, though they were all early risers. Max liked to get up every Saturday morning and watch cartoons, eat cereal. Before they had moved to Hawkins, she sometimes offered Billy to join her. Things had been very different ever since they moved. Max didn't invite him to do anything, did her best not to even speak to him, and only glared in his general direction. She was growing up to be angry, angry like Billy, but with her little nerd group (and Steve), who knows what would happen.

Neil woke up at 5 A.M. every morning, and with it being 6 A.M., he would be awake, and it would be unavoidable to at least say something with respect to his whereabouts.

Billy drummed his fingers on his wheel and stared at the door. Right. Get up. Get out. Get in. Get it over with. He closed his eyes and shuddered. Why the hell hadn't he stayed in bed with Steve? He rubbed his face and groaned. Shit. He shoved the door open and stepped out. He pushed his keys into his pocket and closed the door gently. Perhaps they would all be asleep. Perhaps he could just slip by. He licked his lips and headed to the door.

Once he managed to get his house key (which didn't touch his Camaro key, thank you), he unlocked the door and eased it open. His heart picked up, but he tried to tell himself that it was ridiculous, that he was fine, that this would be the same or less than any other time. After all, it wasn't like Neil hit him all the time. He closed the door behind him and glanced around.

With both Susan and Max there, his chances were better. He liked to

pretend like he wasn't like that in front of them. It was so still and quiet, but not like Steve's home. Somehow the silence was still oppressive, like this air that just hung around in the house. It made it difficult to breathe, difficult to think, and the only place of safety Billy sometimes had was his room.

He didn't hear any noise, nothing in the kitchen and the T.V. wasn't on. It was possible that Neil had left and gone somewhere, sometimes he did that, was the first when the grocery store opened and avoid the line.

Billy felt the familiar coiling in his stomach as he stepped further into the house. He, at least, hadn't heard anything at this point, and that was always good. He could make his way to his room, which was the smartest idea. He glanced around wearily and had the urge to turn and walk out. Shit. Steve had made him feel the type of safe that he hadn't known in years. *Fucking years*. And now all he wanted to do was go back to that, like some kind of goddamn pussy.

Feeling as though he had slipped through the cracks, Billy walked as quietly as he could through the hallway. He ran his fingers through his hair as he finally made it to his room. At least, there, he felt a little safer. Well, not much, but enough to sleep without too much anxiety. He pushed the door open and stepped in. Once he did, he let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Shit. Okay. He was okay.

The heavy door started to close automatically behind him, softly and slow, and Billy would be home free. Max would wake up and watch her cartoons and maybe Neil would glare at him, but he would be able to leave the house that evening, maybe see Steve again, and it would be forgotten. It was almost lucky.

But since when had Billy Hargrove ever been lucky?

Neil grabbed the edge of the door, held it open from closing and stepped halfway inside the door. "The prodigal son returns. Where have you been all night?" His voice was low, maybe to not wake Max and Susan, but it was no less dangerous. Neil stepped inside the room and closed the door behind him, watching Billy carefully, for any signs that he might be lying, for any signs of what he had done wrong, for any signs he was once again a fucking disappointment.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. Billy turned around slowly so he could face his dad. He stared at him and then looked off to the left for a moment. When he looked back, he swallowed, unable to keep the small amount of fear (and maybe anger) from his body. He stayed standing where he was, unwilling to move because he knew it would be a sign of weakness to his pops.

"At a friend's," Billy replied and clenched his hands. He tried to think back to the night before. Had Steve left any marks on his neck? His chest? Did he smell like another guy? He had slept in Steve's bed, so he may. But Billy was a guy, so he could fucking hope that his dad left it at that and didn't pry, or didn't assume. He clenched his jaw and looked at the floor. When he realized that he hadn't clipped on "sir," he looked up in alarm and quickly rectified it, "At a friend's, sir."

"Did I give you permission to stay at a friend's, Billy?" His tone was cold, his affect flat as he gave a hard look to his son. Had Billy ever had a good time with his father, even one pleasant memory? There had been times where he wasn't being hit, where there was silence, but Neil didn't smile at Billy, didn't ever laugh with him. There were

orders. Orders to follow and be obeyed.

They had left California as a result of the base closing in San Diego and Billy's own...proclivities. But even when they were there, his father was constantly complaining about the influence of all the "chinks" and "spics" coming into the neighborhood. "This used to be a damn good country, a damn good country, but it's gone to shit." That's what Neil would say every morning, and when Billy had been caught in his car, one boy leaning in to kiss him, Neil had seen. Neil wrenched open the door to the Camaro, dragged that boy out and beaten him with an inch of his life. His teeth were still on the driveway and Susan had screamed, called 911 for the boy before Neil threw him in his room, kicked him so hard he broke three ribs. His nose was broken and one particularly hard punch had damaged his hearing and Billy had an inner ear imbalance for a few months after. But that had been nothing compared to the words that his father called him.

"FAGGOT."

He had told Billy he would rather have a dead son than a faggot for a son. And maybe Neil would have killed him to prove his point. The rages had been better since he married Susan, had to hide his true self after all, but the threat was always there.

Billy clenched and unclenched his fists as he tried to think about what to say, what to do, and his whole body started to tremble. "N-no, you didn't, but I-I had taken Maxine and I had watched her. I did everything you asked. I did my chores, dad. I didn't-I didn't do anything wrong, I swear." And then his dad was spewing that garbage at him, and he was flinching, and his chest hurt. He swallowed several times and refused to meet his dad's eye.

"I'm not a faggot, *sir*," Billy managed, despite his mind playing out exactly what Steve did to him. Exactly what he did to Steve. The noises Steve had made. The smiles and the soft kissing and the way Steve had said *next time*. Bile rose into his throat and he tried to swallow it down. "I'm not a faggot. I wasn't. I was just hanging out with a friend."

And part of him wanted to scream. Max hung out with her friends. Max had time outside of this house, away from Neil, away from his bullshit, but Billy couldn't *have* that. He finally looked up at his father and hated the fact that his eyes burned with unshed tears. "Just a friend, dad. I swear."

"Your mother--your mother was soft on you boy. Women are soft. But my job is to turn you into a man, a real *man*, not some goddamn fairy faggot ass." Neil was quick and reached out his hand, gripping Billy's jaw tightly as he stepped forward and loomed over him.

His father was only a two or three inches taller than him, but he might as well have been a goddamn skyscraper. Neil's face was twisted in hatred, hatred for his only son as his breath washed over him, his voice still low. "I let you get away with so much, don't I Billy? And you still can't learn a single goddamn lesson--not even one. You don't *have* friends, not without my say so--do you understand me?"

Neil held him there, his eyes blazing and challenging him to say something, to say just one thing out of line and then he could hit Billy. Susan wouldn't even say anything then, Billy was unruly, he had to be disciplined, teenage boys were like that. Billy had to listen to Neil give her every excuse in order to justify his behavior, justify

the beatings. And when Susan and Max didn't seem them as frequent, they even felt like well, maybe they were justified. Billy acted the way he did and there had to be some sort of consequences for his actions.

Pain blossomed through Billy's jaw and he did his best to ignore it, to breathe through it, because he knew it wasn't the only thing coming. He let his eyelids droop half-way shut as Neil loomed over him. Even as fear made his muscles quiver, he still felt that spark of anger and jealousy he had towards Max for not having to deal with this, for being able to live her life, even if she really wasn't sure what happened behind closed doors (like his). He breathed in slowly through his nose and felt the first tear slip down his cheek.

"Why, dad? Why can she--Max has friends," Billy grit out, even though he knew that wasn't the best idea. He was just desperate to understand his dad. Why him? Why was he the target? Why couldn't he have friends but she could? He looked up at Neil finally, making eye contact. "I want to have friends, dad." Perhaps he was trying to appeal to Neil's dad-qualities (which weren't much) by not calling him sir. He hoped that maybe, just maybe, Neil would listen to him and at least answer his question.

"Why can she--" Neil blinked at him for a moment, looking at his son's face intently. Neil could see the tear rolling down his cheek as he held him by his jaw. It was silent and still for a moment before Neil roared, "Because I'm not raising a FUCKING FAGGOT!"

He shoved Billy hard against the shelves in his room, one of the shelves fell down and the items tumbled to the floor, some of them breaking instantly. The strong smell of his cologne filled the room, the bottle must have broken. "Do you think I want you going out, looking the way you do, prancing around with your friends--other

fairies--” And then he punched Billy once in his face, right over his left eye as his vision dimmed for a moment.

“Do you know how much I allow you to have! And you have to humiliate me, mock me behind my back--do you enjoy this, boy? Do you? Everything, *everything* you have is because I allow it!” Neil pressed up hard against Billy, his hand was wrapped his throat and the other fisted in his hair, he was panting and he looked at Billy insanely when there was loud banging on the door, Susan calling Neil’s name quickly.

Billy was going to apologize somewhere in there--between being shoved against the shelves, the smell of his cologne mixing with Steve’s smell on his clothes, and being punched a little too hard in the face. He sputtered, holding up his hands in surrender before Neil had him by the throat and hair. He choked a bit as he tried to breathe, and he blinked several times to right the world. It twirled and circled, probably from the blow, and he sucked in little, sharp gasps so he could breathe around Neil’s hand.

When he heard Susan calling, he tensed. His gaze flickered to his door and then to Neil. He wondered, vaguely, what his dad would do. Normally, when she came in, he stopped. But that fucking look in his eyes made Billy dizzy and he was having a hard time concentrating. “Mum...better without you...” Billy managed. He had seen Neil raise his hand once or twice to his mother, and he had always believed she deserved better. He had no idea what Susan was thinking, putting her daughter in the same house as this fucking nutjob. He sneered, although it was half-hearted because his fucking head was pounding. He hadn’t even said anything that bad, which is where his retort came from. If he was going to get beaten, he was going to give his dad a reason to fucking do it.

Not that he apparently needed one. Billy, high on adrenaline, laughed, even if it was choked. “Y’think bringing me here... would fix me... You can’t fix me, *sir*.”

Neil’s eyes were wide, stared at his son with this *look*, one that Billy had only seen when his father had put him in the hospital, long before Susan came around. His face twisted and it was so monstrous when he reached up and in a swift jerking motion had ripped Billy’s earring out of his ear before he tossed it on the floor. His hand was still fisted tightly in his hair as Neil dragged Billy across the room, almost like a mother would hold a disobedient child’s ear, as he led Billy to his door, throwing it open and dragging Billy into the hallway.

Max stepped out of her room from the commotion, her long red hair in this curtain around her as she stared in horror at the scene before her. She stood in the hallway, frozen and terrified. She had never seen Neil, not like this, not even close to this.

“MOVE!” Neil barked to Susan as she stepped out to the way, followed them and tried to speak to Neil. She pleaded for him to let go of Billy, she clearly didn’t want Max to have to see this either.

But Neil didn’t listen to her, maybe couldn’t even hear her as he dragged Billy to the living room. He reached inside one of the drawers next to the couch and pulled out a pair of scissors. Without another word he jerked back Billy’s head, fisted as much of his hair as he could and cut it.

The sound of the scissors was sharp and the top of his right ear was cut in the process. When it was gone, Neil shoved Billy’s head forward. “Everything, *everything* in this goddamn house is because I

allow you to have it, and I'm not raising a fucking faggot any more!"

Billy regretted what he had said immediately. He hadn't thought--he didn't think--and the blinding pain made him cry out as the earring was torn from him and tossed. He could feel the blood on his neck, on his cheek, dripping down to his shoulder and for a moment, he thought he was going to throw up (because what was next?). He was sure his dad had been done at that point, but when he wasn't, and he was pulling him forward by the hair, Billy stumbled after him. He could barely breathe at this point, in too much pain and shock to actually respond as he was shoved forward and held still.

When his dad cut his hair, Billy thought, okay, it would grow back, and then he thought he must be delirious. He must be so full of pain that nothing felt like it mattered. He grunted as his head was shoved forward, and the burning of the cut on his ear made more tears slip down his cheeks. He tried to control his choppy breathing, his shaking, but it was too fucking much and everything started to dim.

"I'm sorry," Billy pleaded. He didn't even try to cover the wounds on his ears. He simply stayed pliant under his father, knowing that was the best route at this point. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, sir. I'm sorry." He was babbling, and he knew that, but with the pain, shock, and the urge to throw up, Billy knew he couldn't take anymore. His eyes, glazed and wet with tears, flickered back just in time to see Susan and Max. He blinked once and looked away.

"You're sorry? You're sorry! Goddamn right you're sorry!" Neil then slapped him hard, as hard as he could, and it sent Billy down on the ground. "Apologize--apologize to Susan and Maxine--! That they have to see this, have to see my disrespectful faggot soon come in at any hour he damn well pleases! That's who you apologize to!" He stomped once on his back, and the bile was right in the back of his throat.

He could hear Max scream for him, tell him to get up, but it was all because she had never seen this. She only thought of Billy was her mean brother, a bully who towered over her himself, and not somebody who could really get hurt. But there was no needle filled with drugs to stop Neil then. It was whenever he felt like Billy had learned his lesson, felt like he was going to be a good son.

And that was the funniest thing of all: Billy Hargrove would never be anything but a disappointment to his father.

Billy hadn't even realized what had happened before he was on the floor and he couldn't see straight. He moaned, and it sounded fucking pathetic. He shifted so he could be on his side, but as his dad kicked him, he choked and curled. The bile he had managed to swallow earlier pushed its way up and he coughed. Was he even throwing up? He couldn't fucking tell. He couldn't figure out up from down and side to side. He just *was*, throbbing with a high-pitched ringing in his ears. He opened his eyes, just then realizing that he shut them, and tried to look at Max and Susan. He needed to apologize. He needed to---so his dad would stop--

"Please," Billy managed and flinched. Fuck. He wasn't sure if he could take anymore. "Please, I'm sorry. Susan--Max--I'm sorry--dad, please--" He covered his face with his arms, at least, even if he was already bloody as fuck.

For a moment, all Billy wanted was to be safe. To have someone that cared. To have *one fucking human being* who gave two shits about him. He closed his eyes again and swallowed what tasted like blood. He held still on the ground, knowing that in some fucked up part of his dad's head, that that was showing submission and guilt, that he

was groveling and it was better this way.

Susan stood there, covered her face as she sobbed and shook her head, unable to do anything else when Max screamed and ran down the hallway. Neil kicked him again and he was sure that he could taste blood in his mouth, he wasn't even sure where it was coming from. Maybe Neil would never stop, maybe this would actually be it.

It had always been strange to think what would actually happen when Billy turned 18, where he would go and what he would do. But then again there was always the possibility that he wouldn't make it to 18, and that was the prospect that seemed the most likely at the moment. His father was going to finally kill him and then he would be able to get free of him, finally be happy, and shit, maybe even see his mother again.

Billy wasn't a good person, but even he deserved better than this...right? It was the sound of a gunshot that disrupted the sounds of Neil's ragged panting as he kicked Billy on the ground. Neil was sweating and grunting with effort when he looked towards the hallway. And there was Max, tears running down her cheeks and her entire body shaking as she held a firm grip on the small handgun that Neil had kept in his dresser drawer. He had taken her hunting a year ago, but had not taken Billy.

Billy had thrown up at some point. He hadn't remembered throwing up. But that wasn't the issue. The pain blossoming across his body was a faint ache now as his brain started to waver between here and there. Hell, he lost track of how many times his dad had kicked him, hadn't bothered to keep counting, and wondered, vaguely, if Steve was up yet. And wasn't that the real fucking kicker? He finally gets something out of this shitty ass town. Someone. And he was pretty fucking sure he was going to die.

Everything ripped apart, though, when he heard the unmistakeable sound of a gun. A close fucking gun. He tried to concentrate. He tried to find the source. Had his dad shot him, and he just hadn't felt it yet? He wouldn't put it passed him, and at this point, he'd probably welcome it. But when the pain of a gunshot wound didn't come, Billy opened his eyes and stared blearily at Max. He could see the shape of her body, the red flare of her hair, but that was about it.

"Shit... Max..." Billy should have been nicer to her. He shouldn't have kicked out all of his aggression on her. He should have... he should have been a better somewhat-brother. Now he couldn't even think straight enough or well enough to tell her so. Instead, he continued to waver in and out of darkness, catching small blips of noise and pain before nothing, only to return again, like some kind of sick fucking game.

"Steve..." He wanted Steve. Fuck. He needed him. "Please, Max... please, Steve..." Was he even making sense? He had no fucking idea.

Max gave him one look, unsure of what he was saying or why he wanted it, and the tears still rolled down her cheeks as she focused on Neil. Susan began to try to talk to her, her voice wavering as she asked Max to lower the gun, and Max just screamed, it was loud and piercing and then she stopped--everything was so silent, like everybody had forgotten to breathe for a moment, except for Max, who was panting.

Her lower lip quivered as she kept the gun on Neil. "Get. Out." She tried to keep her voice as steady as she kept the gun. Neil sighed, as if the whole conversation was extremely exhausting to him as he turned to her and began to speak, to explain himself, but he barely

got three words out when Max screamed again.

“I said GET OUT!” She howled out at him and along with it came a broken sob. But Neil stood there for a moment and then he looked down at Billy, his eyes still narrowed. He didn’t care what he had done, it was clear by the expression on his face.

“One day boy, one day you will get it.” And then Neil moved swiftly through to the backdoor in the kitchen, grabbed his keys while Max kept the gun trained on him the entire time. The house was silent as Neil made his way through the kitchen and they all heard the screen door slammed out back, and then the telltale signs of Neil’s truck being turned on and driving away. Susan collapsed on the floor in a fit of sobs and Max stood there, shaking violently, before she walked over slowly to where Billy laid curled on the floor.

Billy had finally come back when he heard his dad threatening him and he wanted to laugh and scream at the same time. How much more could he possibly do to him? He flinched and held his breath as Neil walked passed him. He had expected more--maybe another kick or a punch to his skull. It didn’t happen, and Billy started to shake because he was so fucking relieved. Tears spilled again and he hated how weak he felt, how he always gave in after his dad started beating on him.

When Max’s feet came in line of his vision, Billy tried not to grimace. He took in sharp, painful inhales of air as the pain swirled in his head. Neil was gone. He could. He could go to Steve. He could get up, get the fuck out, and go back to Steve’s bed. Steve would take him, right? He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t just *leave him there*. Billy chuckled to himself, but it was wet and almost hysterical. He slid his hands over the living room floor, or whatever the fuck floor he was on, and tried to push himself up.

The explosion of pain was expected, but he couldn't give a fuck. He sat up, slowly, and the world turned upside down on him. He blinked several times and then hunched over to throw up again. At least it was only heaving this time with little fluid. He didn't have much left in him, apparently. He lulled his head back and looked at Max. But he didn't really focus on her, his eyes moving throughout the room.

"Thanks....Max..." Billy needed to get up. He was halfway there. He could do this. He shifted and then fell back again. No. That wasn't happening. "Shit--fuck... I'm sorry..." Why was he apologizing? He couldn't remember. He slid his hands through his hair and let out a choked sob when he realized it was gone. He hadn't really understood it earlier. But it was gone, and he felt fucking violated.

Max reached out gingerly to him, slowly as if he was a frightened animal that was going to bolt at any second. She touched his hand, the one that was already hurt, and the one that Steve had held. Tears rolled silently down her cheeks and she was doing her best not to sob as well. She was unsure what to do, glanced back at her mother, who was still on the floor, crying.

She looked back at Billy, biting her lower lip as she took in his face, the damage there, the bleeding, and god knows what else--maybe all of his pain. She whispered to him, "I'm going to call the Sheriff, okay?" No matter what had happened, she was still just a little girl. She shouldn't have to deal with all this shit either. "Can you stay here, please? I...I want to get help Billy." Her lower lip quivered, all she wanted to do was help, to unsee what had just happened, to not think of her asshole big brother as a kid who got beat by his dad.

Billy wanted to pull his hand back from Max. He didn't want to look

weak, even though his whole body hurt. That beating, combined with the one two nights ago, was worse than any he could remember (recent ones, anyway). When Max mentioned contacting the sheriff, Billy's body ached with panic. If his dad found out--if he found out that the *cops were called*? Billy was fucking dead. Absolutely, positively fucked. He looked from Max to the mess of blood and vomit on the floor, and thought, perhaps she was right. Maybe.

"I gotta... I gotta clean the mess before..." Before his dad gets back and sees it. Before he gets beaten for not cleaning up the remnants of his own beating. He shook his head and tried to concentrate. Max. Police. *Dad*. He opened his eyes and tried to focus on Max--on her fiery hair, her bright eyes, the fear on her face. For a moment, he saw himself, and that *destroyed* him. Max didn't deserve this, and eventually, if Billy left, who knew what Neil would do to her? She didn't fucking deserve this, and Billy didn't want to risk Neil being able to touch her.

"Yeah... yeah, cops. Yeah." Billy didn't bother trying to get up. He wanted to. He needed to clean the place, and Susan... Susan looked wrecked. "Stay here. I can stay here." What was he even agreeing to? Shit, he needed to get up. He felt scattered, unable to keep his thoughts straight. Jesus. "Can... can you get Steve, please?" When he looked at Max, he figured she deserved his respect. Holding a gun to Neil fucking Hargrove took balls.

Max gave him this curious look, like she couldn't even understand why Billy would want him to call Steve when he had beaten him within an inch of his life just a little over a week ago. Shit, so much had changed within the past 24 hours. "Yeah, yeah I can do that, Billy....but just please, stay here."

She searched his face, wanted to hug him in a way that she hadn't

wanted since the first moment that they met--before Billy quickly pushed her at arm's length. She didn't touch him, didn't want to hurt him as she rose slowly and looked at her mother, who was still crying. "Mom, c'mon Mom." Max seemed far older than she actually was as she helped her mother up, who let out this breathless and broken apology. Max led her into the kitchen before she picked up the corded phone and dialed 911.

"I need....the need the Sheriff to come, there's been a...." Not an accident, nothing she had seen was an accident, and tears sprung to her eyes again as Max whispered, "My brother is hurt, please send somebody." Max listened to the woman's instructions on the phone before she gently pressed down on the receiver. She looked over at her mother again. Susan sat at the table, cradling her head in her hands.

Max had to call Dustin to call Steve, he had sounded so happy to hear from her until he heard her tone, soft but strained, as she asked him to call Steve and send him to her house. When Dustin asked why, she honestly didn't know what to say, it was such a strange request. "Billy and I need him, okay?"

Dustin muttered an okay, still confused, and she hung up the phone. Max looked over her mother a finally time before she padded back into the living room. She was still in her nightgown as she knelt down on the floor beside Billy.

Billy watched Max walk away and closed his eyes. His head throbbed and he tried so fucking hard to put two things together. The burning pain that kept knocking into him prevented that, though, and he wondered if he was as bloody as he felt. He reached up to feel along his ears--first the one his earring had been torn out of. The skin was torn apart, but it would heal in time. He would wear the earring

again eventually. Then the top of his ear, where the scissors had got him. He touched it and the flash of pain made him moan. Right. Probably shouldn't touch that.

It didn't feel like long before Max was back at his side. He tilted his head to look at her, but it was hard to focus. At least as the adrenaline started to wear off, he was starting to think better--even if it was diluted by pain. "G'... can you get me a bucket? Water?" Billy was apparently determined to clean up the mess because in his head, Neil would be back, and he didn't want anymore damage to his face or his body. Hell, Neil may have cut off most of his hair, but it was a shit job and he was sure he looked like fucking shit. He closed his eyes and bit back the tightening in his chest.

Tears. He wanted to cry again, and how fucking stupid was that. It was over. Neil wasn't there, so why was that fear still there? He glanced down at his hand and blinked at the bandages. Steve. Right. He remembered when Steve wrapped his hand, when he made that stupid ass joke, when he smiled all uncertainly like he had no idea what he was doing. Billy dropped his head back and wondered, again, if Max would actually get him the cleaning supplies.

Then again, was he in any position to actually clean?

"Billy...don't worry about it, please. I can....just don't worry about it." She looked over his face and she did slowly rise and scurry off to the bathroom. For a moment it seemed like maybe she would get the cleaning supplies before she returned with the first aid kit that Billy kept damn well stocked.

She opened it and took out some of the antiseptic. She didn't know what else to do, Billy probably needed a goddamn hospital, but she

was too scared to make that call, too scared Billy would really freak out. "I have the um....let me okay?"

She soaked a cotton ball and gently brought it to his face, when it came into contact with the bruises and cuts it burned like hell. Max winced as she took in her brother, Neil had never been anything but kind to her, stern but kind. It was always Billy who...but she supposed things weren't exactly as she thought. She had seen Neil hit him before, and she didn't like it, but sometimes when been especially mean to her she had felt some sense of justice and satisfaction. The thought of it now turned her stomach.

Max whispered, "Why didn't you say something?"

Billy's eyes were following Max as well as they possibly could. He sometimes lost his focus, but he managed to gain it back when she began to dab the antiseptic across his wounds. He didn't want to see her face. He didn't want to see that she was sorry for him, that she was upset or pitied him. He closed his eyes, instead, and barely twitched when the cotton ball continued to move over his wounds. He had done this enough, had enough run ins, to be used to the sting of the chemical. His breath only hitched at some points, his chest stuttering before falling again.

"Say what...?" Billy blinked his eyes open and glanced at her. "Y'mean about this...? Max, this has been going on... longer than I've *known* you." He chuckled and froze. Not the best choice. He wheezed out quietly. "It never... I never thought..." Then again, he had been put in the hospital before. He had just figured since he was so much bigger now, since he... could actually fight, he'd be okay. Not so much. Neil made his entire body lock up and somehow threw him back into being a child.

“Couldn’t have him goin’ after you, either,” the last comment was off-hand, as if it didn’t mean anything to him, but he looked away from Max and stared at the wall.

Max looked at Billy for an intense moment, the cotton ball just held out in her hand as she leaned forward and very gently wrapped his arms around his neck. She closed her eyes tightly, it didn’t make up for everything but...she never wanted this to happen to Billy, to anybody.

She had just never thought of Neil this way, and she struggled not to cry, not sure what this meant for her family, for Billy, for her, but Neil...couldn’t be trusted around Billy, could he? And maybe then she was going to lose Billy, lose her brother, because no matter how many times Billy corrected her, Billy *was* her brother.

They didn’t hear the sirens, but saw the flash of the red and blue lights as Hopper pulled up in the driveway. Max could see him get out of his car and come up to the front door. Max pulled back a little and searched Billy’s face intently. “We’re going to do this, right?”

Billy froze as Max’s arms wrapped around his neck. His body went taut and he sat still for a few moments, thrown off guard by the affection. He wasn’t used to it. Hell, before last night with Steve, he hadn’t had *true* affection in fucking years. He clenched his fists and then reached up shakily to put his hand on Max’s shoulder. He squeezed her gently and then dropped his hand again.

“Yeah, yeah... Right...” Billy didn’t want to. God, he hadn’t talked to anyone about Neil. It just was, and a cop? He had barely opened up

to Steve, and now a cop was walking into the threshold of the house and Billy wanted to close himself off on his room and pretend everything was okay.

It was, after all, his fault for going to Steve's. It was his fault for not asking permission to have friends. It was his fault for being... him, and Billy had no idea how else to be himself. He was what he was, and it just wasn't enough for his dad.

"Sir..." Billy tilted his head to the side so he could see passed Max and to the door.

Hopper surveyed them both with a grim look. If there was one thing he hated, it was domestic calls. They were dangerous, damn dangerous, and he felt some relief sensing that it was mostly over and the perpetrator wasn't on the scene anymore. "Kid." He nodded to Billy and then glanced at Max and gave her another nod, "Kid."

Max was the only one he really knew here, and even then he hadn't had a great deal of interaction with the kid. It was a small town, so of course he knew when the Hargroves moved in. There hadn't been any other calls to the police department, but that wasn't uncommon. Not until it got out of control anyway, and it clearly had.

Hopper looked over at the blood and vomit on the floor, some of the furniture had been displaced, and he could hear a woman crying to his left. He looked over and it was a grown woman, he assumed the mother, crying at the kitchen table. Hopper sighed, he wasn't really good dealing with tears. He turned his gaze back to the two kids on the ground, obviously caught up in this shit.

Hopper had a few run-ins with Billy, nothing serious, and typically following one of those goddamn high school parties that caused way too much noise. He had seen him sometimes run when the cops finally showed up, but he recalled one instance when he had managed to catch Billy before he took up, and the kid had been a little shit the entire time.

Hopper didn't take Billy to the station, he often didn't take any of these kids in because they were just going to get drunk again and there was no point in a kid having a record over stupid shit he also did when he was a stupid kid.

No, he had just gotten stern with the boy, told him to knock it the fuck off and keep his business inside, not to bother the police with this kinda shit. And if he didn't, he was going to take Billy to the station next time and have his parents come pick him up. Well, that had wiped the shit-eating grin right off his face, and Billy had just mumbled, "Yes, Sir."

Hopper supposed he now understood why.

Billy couldn't exactly imagine what Hopper saw. Hell, he had been drug through the house and thrown, so he wasn't actually sure what it looked like, either. He knew he had thrown up, he knew he had bled, and there was probably hair somewhere, but that was about it. Yet, as the cop stood and took in the house, Billy felt the urge to throw something. *Get out getoutgetoutgetout.*

Being vulnerable wasn't something Billy *did*. Sure, he had let it slide with Harrington, but they had been drunk as fuck and completely okay. Sort of. Right now, Billy wasn't even sure what the cop wanted to do. He shifted and decided to hell with it. He wasn't going to stay

on his ass with the cop in there. Respect and responsibility and shit. He reached up and took a handful of the couch for leverage. Slowly, because his brain felt juiced and his body ached, Billy pulled himself to his feet.

At first, Billy swayed. The room swirled and it felt as if he was being kicked in the chest again. But he stayed up, because he was Billy fucking Hargrove, and as much as he hurt, he had to be *okay*. He settled his hand on the top of the couch *only because* he needed help with balance. He blinked several times and tightened his grip.

“Whaddya need,” Billy licked his lips, tasting blood and vomit, and ignored the urge to grimace.

Hopper wasn’t really sure if he needed to ask what had happened, didn’t want to ask, since he could obviously see it. But he had to get a statement. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to need to get statements from you, all of you, and the we’ll have to talk about pressing charges.”

Hopper knew from experience how rarely that actually happened. Even if he got a statement from the kid, and even if he managed to arrest Neil, a lot of the victims wouldn’t show to court or drop the charges there. Following up on domestics was a giant pain in the ass, futile and frustrating as hell. But he had been a kid in this situation once, knew what it was like not to talk to anybody, to never be able to voice everything out loud. It didn’t matter if the laws changed, if the scenes were violent, getting the trust of the victims was always the biggest hurdle.

“Kid, tell me the truth, do I need to get you to a hospital right now? We can do this after.” Billy was going to be stubborn as shit, he could

feel it, but he planned to drag him over if he needed to. It had been a long time since he had seen a scene this bad and there was just something about this big kid that reminded him of himself--strong, but unable to stand up against his own father. "Because you look like it's exactly what you need."

Billy seemed to actually think about it as his body swayed. The hospital was probably the right choice, but it wasn't like he hadn't experienced this before. Couldn't he at least take a shower, first? He had been all up in Steve Harrington and then beaten. Blood. Vomit. He glanced down at the remnants of the fight... well, not really a fight. Billy hadn't fought. He had begged like a fucking *pussy*. He closed his eyes, breathed in shakily through his mouth (because maybe there was blood in his nose? He wasn't sure).

"I'll go," Billy didn't want to fight anymore, but he also didn't want to deal with this raging headache. "But I... Shit, Max, did you get Steve?" Right. Two coherent thoughts. Shit. "I mean, can he take me? I don't want to go... in an ambulance."

That was the last thing Billy needed. That was another bill on top of whatever the hospital was going to be, and if they couldn't keep Neil confined, Billy was going to fucking *get it*, just like the guy had threatened on his way out of the house.

"What, Harrington?" Hopper frowned, wondered how Steve fit into all of this. Last he checked a week ago, this kid had beat the shit out of him. Fucking kids, how that much could change in just a week, he had no idea.

Max turned to Billy and softly said, "I called Dustin, he said that he was going to call him, I didn't have his number." She didn't get it

either, but if it was what Billy wanted, she wasn't going to say anything. Max reached over and gently took his hand. She could tell he didn't want to go to the hospital, the more that they did, the more real this all became. "I want to go too, Billy."

She looked at him intensely, she wasn't about to accept no for an answer. Max didn't know what she would do with her mother right now, didn't even know what to say. But there would be time for that later, she just wanted to be with Billy then.

Hopper sighed and approached Billy. "Cmon, kid, I can take you in my car and we'll get him later, okay?" He extended his hand and took Billy's, he didn't so much as wait for Billy as he hauled him up as gently as he could, leading him to the front door.

Billy looked down at Max's hand as it fell in his own and he licked his lips again. He felt as if it was becoming a habit for when he wasn't sure what to say. What to do. What to think. He pursed his lips, and he was going to ease away from her, but then Hopper was next to him. Panic seized his gut as he was taken by his hand and hauled up.

Hopper wasn't Neil. Hopper wasn't Neil. *Hopper wasn't Neil.* Billy struggled to breathe as Hopper helped him out of the god forsaken house and to the car. He knew Max would follow. He knew Max would get into the truck and try to keep Billy calm.

But *what if* Neil got out? What if he found him in the fucking *hospital* with the *cops* there? He'd be fucking dead then. And that was all he could think about as he stared at the truck with the damn lights on it. He bit the inside of his cheek and looked away.

“What do I gotta do,” Billy managed, “To keep--keep him away??”

Hopper sighed and stopped. He faced Billy and tried to make sure that he was calm. He was sure that if the kid was able to bolt that he would have already done so. “Well, it’s going to be pressing charges and that...might involve a restraining order and going to Court.” Billy would also have to talk about what happened to him, and Hopper wasn’t sure if the kid was ready for that, capable of that. He tried to give a small, tight smile. He was working on those.

“But we can discuss all of that later, kid, the first thing we need to do is get you to a hospital.” He opened his passenger door and lead Billy back to there before he could have a chance to really argue or put up a fight. No matter what he had to get the kid fixed up. Hopper nearly had Billy inside the truck when Steve’s Beamer quickly ripped down the street, well over the speed limit, and came to a screeching halt at the curb.

Hopper watched Harrington hurry out of his car and run up the driveway. Steve’s eyes were wide as he saw Hopper there, standing beside Max and...he stood there for a moment, his gaze fixated on Billy. “Harrington,” Hopper said with a nod, he wasn’t sure if Steve heard him.

Billy could feel his shoulders slump at the mention of a restraining order and court. How could he got to court against Neil? Look him in the damned face and recount what he’s done to him? He swallowed and wanted to vomit, but his stomach was empty. He tuned Hopper out for a moment, his head buzzing as he tried to figure out his next steps (figuratively). “I want to do it--” And then there were tires, and the sound of a car, and suddenly that stupid ass brown BMW was

coming to a hard stop in front of his house.

And Billy couldn't breathe.

Steve looked as if he had been woken up. His hair was a mess and he looked rushed, which, Billy guessed he was. But the biggest thing was that he was *there* and now Billy felt all fucking weirded out.

"Har--Steve--" Billy winced at his voice. It had broken, cracked, and he felt like the fucking pussy his dad called him. He dropped his gaze from Steve to the floor. "You came." Because he had been sure the guy wouldn't. He had thought... Billy clenched his jaw and ignored the stab of pain because that was better than the sting in his eyes. "Can he take me now...? I'll go there. Promise. I just--I'd like him to take me."

Steve stood there for a long moment, shocked by what he was seeing. Billy was beat to hell. There was blood all over his face and it was matted in his hair--and half of that was fucking missing. His shirt was torn open and Steve could see bruises all over his chest, even more than what he had left Steve's place. They were deep, ugly and purple, and the edges of the blood vessels burst around the bruises like stars.

Some small part of him wondered if somehow the gate had opened, there hadn't seemed to be any other way to take down Billy fucking Hargrove other than by supernatural means. But life wasn't always so simple and he approached them slowly, never taking his eyes off of Billy.

"Yeah, I can do that." He wasn't sure what else to say. Steve had been

upset, but not surprised, when he had turned in his bed and found it empty. What was surprising was the note on his nightstand.

“Until next time, princess. B.”

He wondered what the fuck he was getting himself into when his heart pounded and he fell back into his bed like some love-struck chick. He wanted more, needed more of Billy Hargrove in his life. He had been dozing when Dustin called him, his voice confused as he said Max had called his house at this “ungodly” hour and said that he was needed at the Hargrove house. That Billy asked for him.

Steve didn’t have any idea that it was because of this. He would have stayed up with Billy all night if he knew the idiot blonde was going to walk into this.

“I’m still coming, Billy.” Max piped up, her voice taking on an assertive tone which Steve hadn’t heard since she drove Billy’s car while he screamed for his life in the backseat.

Billy had felt rigid that entire time, as if the wait to see if Steve would take him was worse than whatever happened inside of his house. He stared at the ground until Steve agreed, and his muscles slowly released. The bruising throbbed as he relaxed. Fuck this place. Fuck this place and fuck his dad. “Thank fuck,” Billy managed and turned his body to Steve instead of toward Hopper.

Now, the key here was to get to Steve without falling over. He glanced down at Max at her statement and knew there wasn’t any room for argument. There wouldn’t be with this. Max was just as

stubborn as Billy. He made his way toward Steve, a little off-set, but managed to not fall on his face.

When Billy stepped in front of Steve and breathed him in, his harsh expression fell. “Jesus. Thank you for coming. I didn’t... want to go with him.” In the cop car, just in case his dad was around and saw. “Y’find my... the note?” As if that was important. But Steve was here and while standing was becoming increasingly difficult, Billy didn’t want to stop looking at Steve.

Steve stood there, unsure of what to say and just taking him in. Steve couldn’t imagine the pain that Billy must be in and Jesus Christ, why was he still worried about Steve? There were so many more important things that were going on at this moment and Steve would have hit Billy if he didn’t think it would knock the guy out. He just gave a quick nod and looked down at Max. “Open the side door and get in the car.”

Max glanced between the two of them, and she wasn’t stupid. Both of them were aware that to say that this was unusual was a big understatement. She would have questions and she might not voice them then, but they were still there. She just mumbled an okay and hurried off to Steve’s car, opening the door for Billy and then getting into the backseat. Steve knew she was still watching them, and damnit so was Hopper.

Steve let out a shaky breath, knowing Billy was still staring at him as he called out to Hopper. “I know where it is, I’ll see you there!” He had to maintain his composure as he moved to Billy’s side and wrapped his arm under Billy’s armpits.

“Yeah, I got it, but I need you to walk with me now, okay, big guy?”

And he tried to smile, but Steve knew it was strained. The last thing that he wanted to do was hurt him more than he already was.

Billy watched Max climb into the car and wondered if this was the start of some new relationship with her. Probably not. Knowing himself, as soon as they gave him something to deal with the pain, he would be back to his asshole self. He would drive her away (and probably Steve) because *nothing* is good for Billy Hargrove. It may look good, it may seem to have promise, but there was always that knife being brandished and Billy always ended up getting stabbed. It was why he simply *didn't* get involved, didn't care, and perhaps why last night with Steve was a fucking mistake.

But when he looked back to Steve and saw the concern there, he wondered if he was fooling himself. Was it such a bad thing? Probably, especially in this small town. Billy may even end up dead (fucking queers, right?). Perhaps by his own old man's hand. He clenched his jaw at the thought and then hissed, startled out of his thoughts as Steve wrapped an arm beneath his own arms.

"Christ, Harrington. Warning first?" Billy furrowed his brow, but didn't object to being basically man-handled into the passenger seat of the BMW. At least the seat was soft, unlike the leather in his Camaro. Still, his brain flitted back to Steve, and normally, Billy could shrug off any sort of emotions or feelings, but with his body beat to shit, he could resist very little. His eyes trained on Steve, his focus sloppy but purposeful.

"Max..." Billy tilted his head. He didn't turn around because he was sure it would hurt, but he needed to talk to her before Steve climbed into the car. "Not...not a word, okay?" Basically, if Billy wanted Steve to know something, he would tell him. Granted, if Steve used his fucking doe eyes or concerned mom look on him, Billy wasn't sure if

he could actually resist. Damn princess.

Max scoffed a little from the backseat and shook her head a little before she slumped back in her seat with her arms folded across her chest. Steve closed Billy's door and hurried to the driver side. He slid into his own with a small grunt and glanced once over at Billy.

Steve reached out and took Billy's hand, he squeezed it just once before he released it and slipped on his sunglasses. Steve could practically hear Max's gears turning in the backseat, but that was Billy's story to tell—not his. So it wasn't much of anything, not really, but Steve had to do something. There was no real way for them to communicate until much later and fuck, Steve had a lot to say. Billy had *asked* for him and that meant something, even if the asshole would never say it.

Steve clenched his jaw as he started his car and began to quickly drive to the hospital. He could see Hopper's truck just behind him, who Steve knew would also have his own set of questions for him. What the fuck was going to say? His hands tightly gripped the steering wheel as they drove in silence.

Billy paused when Steve took his hand and squeezed it. He knew he would get questions later for Max. More like demands. She was more demanding than anything else. He dropped his head back against the seat and looked out the window. Trees and things passed them, but it was a complete blur. Billy was struggling to find something to say--*anything*--to make this less awful than it actually was.

Realizing that the BMW was probably worth ten of his own car, Billy turned his head to look at Steve. "Probably gettin' blood on your car," he murmured. He knew Max could hear him, but he opted not

to care. Not right now, at least. “I’ll... help you. Later. Cleaning it.” Shit. Smooth. Perhaps he had one too many knocks to his head. He blinked and looked back out the window.

A part of him was hoping and doing something stupid like *praying* that his dad wouldn’t see them. He slid a hand over his chest and curled his fingers around the pendant on his necklace.

Steve frowned and cast a glance at Billy. He was grateful for the sunglasses because he really didn’t want Billy seeing him in that moment. Steve gave a small shrug and mumbled, “Don’t worry about it, it’s not a big deal.” It wasn’t like he had helped clean Billy’s car when he had gotten blood all over it, waking up in that goddamn back seat with—Steve glanced in the rear view mirror at Max, who was pointedly staring at him. Shit.

Steve glanced over at Billy again and resisted the urge to grab his hand again. Once was concern, but twice....The last thing he wanted was for Billy to have some sort of episode in his car, for them to get in an argument.

“We’ll be there soon and they can get you patched up.” And discuss their options. Hopper wasn’t going to let this go, no matter what Billy wanted, and Steve really didn’t want him to either. Shit, if he had known that was what Billy was walking into, he would have never let him leave. Is that what Billy meant when he said he had a run in with his father, that night before the Byers? What had Billy said, Steve was just there? Steve clenched his jaw, feeling really shitty for all the times he had made some sort of mocking comment to Nancy or Jonathan about Billy just being some muscle bound metal head asshole. He should have known better, said something. People were more complicated and messy than all that.

Billy watched for Steve's reaction, but then closed his eyes. He was exhausted, and the ride of the BMW was nothing like his own car. It was smooth and comfortable, and Billy felt *safe* again, even if he was about to be poked and prodded. He grimaced at the idea and sunk deeper into the seat. His fingers clenched and unclenched, as if that helped the random stabs of pain or the way his head sort of looped and his vision blurred (seriously, though, he shouldn't have said anything to his dad about his mom--that was his own fault).

"You were pretty good at it," Billy opened his eyes again to look at Steve. He held up his hand, as if to emphasise the point. Of course, that had been a move on Billy's part. Grabbing that bat seemed like his only option in calming down the guy after whatever the fuck he dreamed about. He dropped his hand and glanced over Steve's profile. Really, the guy was too pretty. Maybe if he hadn't even gone to Steve's, they wouldn't be sitting there.

At the end of the day, Billy was going to blame himself. It's what he did. It didn't matter that his dad beat the shit out of him. The asshole's words were always spinning in his head. Billy squinted at the road. Maybe this was just a punishment for who he was (but he would kill *anyone* if they touched Steve that way--if they hurt him for who he was). The irony was lost on him.

"I think you're a little beyond my area of expertise right now, Hargrove." Steve muttered, and he hated that that sounded like he was being an asshole about this, hated that they both had to close off just a bit. But nobody could know what had happened between them, not yet anyway, and fuck, Steve wasn't even sure himself.

Steve was really concerned that Billy was going to try to worm his

way out of the hospital, the guy didn't like to be coddled and cared for. So while it may have touched Steve that Billy trusted him, even a little, he couldn't be the only one helping Billy right now. He was going to have to open up just a little bit and if Steve had to push him, push him to a hospital, push him away from his piece of shit father, Steve would do that.

Max had moved up a little in the seat and looked at Billy's hand. She glanced at Billy, clearly wanted to ask him questions before she settled back in the seat. Steve parked in front of the emergency room and Hopper pulled in two spots down. Steve tucked his sunglasses on the visor and turned to Billy, took him in as they all sat there for a moment.

"I'm going to go around and get you inside there, okay?" It wasn't a request, but it wasn't entirely an order either. Billy needed to be on the same page as him, united fucking front.

Billy snorted at Steve's comment. True, this wasn't something that Steve could patch up. Yet, Billy hadn't been sure what else to say. What *does* someone say in this situation? Hey, enjoyed last night even though I punched your face in before, and now I need help, up for it? Yeah, that sounded like shit. He glanced out the window as the Beamer rolled to a stop. His stomach lurched and Billy felt like his skin was crawling. He didn't want to go in. He didn't *want* to deal with those fucking people. He didn't want to be touched anymore (Steve was an exception, damn it).

When Steve spoke, Billy managed to pull out of whatever he was thinking about to look at him. The question wasn't even that. Steve wasn't giving him an option, and what was Billy going to do? Walk away from the hospital? He'd pass out less than a half mile away (probably less). He shot Steve an annoyed look and then swallowed

another glob of blood and bile. At least what was stuck in his throat was gone now, even if it felt absolutely disgusting going back down.

“Sure, Harrington. Whatever,” Billy clenched his jaw and then dropped it immediately. He needed to stop doing that, considering the pain that shot through his temples. He turned away from Steve (when had he turned toward him?) and opened the door. Despite the pain and the urge to say fuck it and not move, Billy pushed himself up and managed to *not* fall out of the car. Instead, he leaned heavily on the door and stared at the entrance to the ER.

Shit. Shitshitshit. What if his dad found out he came here? What if that cop couldn’t do anything about him? What if... *fuck*, Billy was dead. Once the cops were called, his death certificate had been signed. He gripped the door and bit the inside of his cheek.

“Jesus Christ, Hargrove--!” Steve was up in an instant and hurrying around to the passenger side. “Don’t just--fuck, c’mon.” Steve stepped to Billy’s side and muttered, “this is your warning,” and slid his arm around under Billy’s. Billy was tense as fuck and Steve could see him staring at the hospital entrance. Maybe he should have already been there, maybe after that night at the Byers. Billy had avoided the showers all week, how bad had the bruises been when they were fresh? How bad was the damage then? How many times should Billy have already gone to the hospital and didn’t because he was a stubborn bastard?

Steve felt a pang of guilt at that, it wasn’t just Billy being stubborn. It was his fucking father. Steve knew all too well that feeling of being a disappointment to your parents, especially his father. But to get beat within an inch of your life, to have to deal with the aftermath, it was understandable why Billy avoided the hospital. Steve sensed Max was outside and could hear Hopper on his radio. He let out a shuddering

breath and pressed very gently into Billy's side to get his attention.

"Hey, I got you, alright? We're going to do this."

Billy flinched involuntarily when Steve moved to his side. He pulled his gaze from the ER doors to the guy he had slept with last night. Honestly, what was he going to do? Walk away at this point? He should. He really should, but he only tensed as that arm looped around his waist and helped him stand. He allowed only some of his weight to be carried by Harrington because he wasn't going to make them both fall over. But his mind trailed back to his dad. Would he actually not see him after this? Would this be enough? Fuck, the last time, the one where he had bled everywhere and the doctors had patched him up... he had gone straight back to his dad. But he had been young. Maybe now could be different.

Or he was just a complete idiot. Hope wasn't something he was allowed to have.

When Steve pressed into his side, Billy looked over, pulled from his thoughts. He blinked at Steve and then looked away. He couldn't keep his gaze anymore. Steve was concerned and they had *one night* together. One stupid night that may not happen again. He closed his eyes and then swallowed. At least there wasn't much blood that round.

"Yeah. Yeah. I know." Billy stepped forward enough to slide the door to the BMW closed. "Let's just. I need to get this over with."

Steve nodded and together they made their way forward to the

emergency room. Steve could feel the tension in his body increase as soon as they were inside and held him firmly as Hopper moved in front of them to speak to the staff and get a room available. It was pretty dead inside and they were able to get into a room pretty quickly. Steve supposed it helped to have Hopper there with them, who gave curt answers to any inquiries the doctors had.

Steve helped direct Billy to a hospital bed and turned his body so that he could help lower the blonde down. He heard the scrape of a chair on the floor and glanced back to see Max had pulled a chair forward beside the bed.

“Can you sit? Or lay down?” He really didn’t know how badly Billy was injured beyond his face and the part of his chest where his shirt was open. It was torn and needed to be thrown away.

Billy stayed silent the entire walk in, and even into the room. He was still chewing on his thoughts, sorting out ideas of how he was going to deal with this, both current and afterward. What about school? How the fuck was he going to go to school like this? And what about the house? If Neil did go to jail, he supposed Susan would take over the house. Then what? It wasn’t like he was Susan’s kid. She could kick him to the curb if she had an issue with him. Sure, he’d be eighteen eventually, but what about until then? And even then, how the fuck was he supposed to be on his own? Maybe Billy was getting too ahead of himself, but this is how he had been trained to think with his father around. The *What ifs* drove him insane.

Then, Steve was talking to him. What had he said? Billy blinked and glanced around. How long had he been in his own thoughts? Okay. Bed. Steve probably said something about the bed. He settled onto it but didn’t make a move to lie down. “I’m fine,” Billy muttered. Soon enough, those damned doctors would be in the room, asking him to

remove his shirt and poking and prodding. Billy's body began to vibrate just thinking about it.

What then? Billy wasn't himself at this point. He didn't feel like himself, so how the fuck was he going to react to them touching and probing? He glanced around the room, taking in the items that were accessible. Why was he even thinking about this? Fuck.

Steve stood close to Billy and fidgeted. Billy was clearly lost in his own thoughts and he really wanted to hold his hand or do, well, something. But he doubted Billy would appreciate in front of other people, and even if Steve didn't really give that much of a shit and would do it for any friend (and was Billy a friend now?), this was already hard enough on Billy.

One of the nurses came over and began to speak to Billy, it was in this very soft tone like Billy was made of glass. Steve didn't really appreciate it and thought it was mildly condescending, so he just imagined what Billy was thinking.

The nurse looked at Billy with a soft smile, "Can you take off your clothes dear, or do you think we may have to cut them off?" Max let out a little whimper and Steve glanced at her. She was biting her lower lip and Steve pressed his tongue into his canine tooth in aggravation. This was not going to go well, even if Billy got medical attention, this whole ordeal was going to be fucking hard.

"I can just....help him out of them." Steve mumbled, glancing at Billy's face. There was no way he was going to look at Hopper or Max and Steve told himself that no matter what, this was just the right thing to do.

Billy could feel the muscle in his jaw ticking as people came into the room. He could handle Steve and Max. Well, either, truly, but as more people slid in, his lungs felt like they were burning and he was suffocating. He hissed through his teeth and curled his fingers into his jeans. He had no idea how injured he was underneath the clothing. He also had no idea how bad his face was, or his ear, but he knew it fucking hurt.

When he was going to respond, say something shitty, Steve answered for him. It kept him from exploding, at least, even if his shoulders trembled with the urge to throw something. Destroy something. He swallowed and tried to stop himself from shaking. It didn't work. It never worked. Not when he was this uptight and this pissed.

"Leave," was the only way he could think of agreeing. He could let Steve help him, but he *wasn't* going to fucking undress in front of everyone. He stared at his hands, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. "Just. Leave. St--Harrington can stay." Because he remembered Steve calling him Hargrove earlier, and he wasn't even sure what kind of terms they were on now.

The nurse left first after she pulled out a dressing gown from the side dresser drawer. Steve was sure she had other people to tend to. Steve signed and turned to Max, he gently ushered her out with a tight smile. It was going to be too much for her to handle for a moment and Steve didn't even want to think about what she had seen. Billy wouldn't be able to deal well with her crying, and shit even Steve didn't know how well he would deal with it either. Hopper was the hardest.

Hopper followed Max silently and shot Steve an intense look. He

didn't have to say anything, Steve knew he expected him to somewhat handle this shit and get Billy in line. This shouldn't couldn't go on. It wasn't good for Billy, wasn't good for Max either. Getting Billy fully on board was going to be really fucking difficult. Billy was really on the edge and if he pushed it too hard, Billy was going to fall off.

It was the first time they had been alone since he came over, but Steve knew he had to focus. He turned to Billy and stood in front of him. Steve reached out and began to wordlessly unbutton Billy's shirt.

Billy relaxed only a little once everyone was gone and the door was slid shut. He closed his eyes and hated that they burned again. Normally, he was able to just cry and destroy shit on his own. Steve was here, though, and he couldn't afford to continue looking like this. The pressure of his teeth on his inner cheek increased until he tasted blood. He hadn't even felt the burn of the slice once his teeth had actually gone through. He swallowed immediately; he could only imagine Steve's response if he knew he had hurt himself intentionally.

What was he supposed to say at this point? Was there anything to say? Billy frowned and watched as Steve began to undo the buttons of his shirt. How bad was he, at this point? Would Steve even tell him? He glanced up, wondering if he could even catch the teen's eyes. When he didn't, he looked down again and licked his lips.

Steve's breath hitched when the shirt was fully parted, there were bruises all fucking over. He wasn't even sure how Billy wasn't lying down, how Billy was able to move at all. He swallowed hard and stared at them for a moment. It was an ugly assortment of dark purple and blue all over Billy's chest. The ones from the night before

were starting to yellow, to heal, but they were already gone. How many blows had his father delivered? How often was Billy used to this?

Steve knew he had to keep calm. He couldn't get upset in front of Billy, not fucking now. If he lost it, then all bets were off. Steve swallowed and tried to keep any emotion out of his voice.

"Do I need to get the pants too?" Steve asked quietly. Billy was looking down and he looked way younger to Steve, unsure of what was going to happen and what he was going to do. His hand was gripping the edge of the bed and Steve reached out and laid his hand on top of Billy's. "The pants too?" He whispered that time, his thumb rubbing a little on the back of Billy's hand.

Billy was good at reading people, but only because it made reading his dad easier. He could see the shifts in Steve's position, in his stance, in the way he moved as he finally parted his shirt. He looked up, but only enough to look at Steve's chest. Should he take his jeans off at this point? Was he bruised anywhere else? He couldn't remember. Where had his dad kicked? Just his upper body? He closed his eyes again and pursed his lips. He could feel the warmth of Steve's hand on his own, but he wasn't even sure what *they* were, and he didn't want attention out of pity.

"I guess," His voice was rougher than he'd like. He shifted his arms first, though, enough to pull his shirt off. It hurt, but how else was he going to get the thing off his body? He dropped it to the side and ignored the splotches of blood on it. After he looked away from his shirt, he reached down and undid his jeans. They were tight, though, so he'd have to stand up and let Steve help him, which was fucking degrading.

After Billy unzipped the jeans, he settled a hand on the bed and then on Steve's bicep. He pushed himself up, but only held onto Steve for balance.

Steve kneeled down wordlessly and grabbed the jeans on each side, wiggled them down as carefully as he could. Goddamn Billy and his tight jeans. He was sure that it really hurt him to take them off, to his pride and to his body. Luckily there were far fewer bruises, which explained Billy's ability to somewhat walk and stay upright.

Steve stood back up and could see bruising along the length of Billy's back. There was dried blood there in two different directions from both his ear and hair, and Steve felt a rage swirling inside of him when he realized that Billy's father had probably nicked his scalp when he had cut off his hair. At least it would grow back.

"I think you can get away with some of the pants here, they should be loose enough so that it's comfortable" Steve grabbed them angrily and knelt down again, held them open as Billy stepped inside of them and he brought the pants back up. Steve let them sit low on Billy's hips, just below a bruise on his tailbone.

Billy wished this was a different situation. He'd love to have Steve peeling off his jeans, but not like this. He forced himself out of his mind for a few minutes as Steve pulled his jeans off and spoke to him. It was almost like white noise, and it was nice to simply escape, even as he automatically stepped into the scrub-like pants and held still as Steve pulled them up.

It wasn't until Steve was in front of him again that he felt wetness on

his cheeks. Fuck. He swiped at his cheeks roughly and then cleared his throat. "Look, you can just... it's fine. I've dealt with this before. It's not... new. Getting angry. It just doesn't help." Billy would know, wouldn't he? But he always got angry, which explained his behavior at school and his viciousness toward Steve that night at Byers'. He looked everywhere but Steve because he didn't want to see his eyes.

Steve looked at his face intently, tried to meet his gaze as Billy looked down, looked anywhere but him. Billy was hurting and he was trying to fucking run again. And Steve got it, he really did. He never really wanted to deal with his own issues until they blew up, but...they had blown up. And they needed to be dealt with. He couldn't just sit by and watch this shit happen.

"Hey, hey, don't...it's okay, just don't." Steve reached down and gently took Billy's hand, intertwining their fingers slowly. He leaned forward and placed a soft kiss over Billy's left browbone. Steve felt a little silly doing it, a little awkward, but he also couldn't let Billy push this away. Steve was going to help him deal with it, at least as much as he could. "It's okay, I want....no matter what this is or what you-you decide about us, I *want* to be here, okay?"

Billy tensed as Steve's fingers intertwined with his. He had been so uncertain about what this was, what it wasn't, that he hadn't thought much into Steve touching him. Sure, he wanted it, now more than ever, but he understood that this wasn't Steve's fight, so why the fuck was he trying to help him? He tightened his fingers around Steve's and finally looked at him, just as Steve pressed his lips to his face.

"Why would I decide...?" Billy wanted to be angry. Anything but this soft warmth, this hopeful feeling in his gut. "Obviously, I don't have shit wrong with it. Being a fucking. Faggot. Or anything. So." Billy shrugged and hissed. Of course he had an issue with it. That's what

lead to this whole ordeal. His dad had been pretty sure he was with another guy. Which, he was, and hello, now he was in the hospital. "But if my dad sees you--if he knows..." He looked at the door, as if mentioning his dad would summon him. "It's just. Better. If you don't care."

"Don't! Don't say that!" Steve squeezed his hand a little harder and glared at him sternly for a moment before Steve tried to collect himself. "Look, you are not--don't fucking call yourself that. Are you going to call *me* that? Because I'm not going to fucking take that, Hargrove. So you knock that shit off right now, and I don't give a flying fuck about your father. I'm here, as long as you want me. Got it?"

Steve bent his knees a little in order to make sure that Billy looked at him, make sure that Billy knew he was damn serious. Steve may not know what the fuck he was doing with Billy, but he wasn't going to allow Billy to just go around saying that about Billy or himself.

"I mean it Hargrove, I need a goddamn yes." Steve stepped close, knew they would be interrupted soon, and he didn't want Billy sitting there, thinking like that.

Billy held his breath as Steve snapped at him. He had sort of expected it, and it lit a fire inside of him. Rekindled that anger that had burned out--or rather--got beaten out, by his dad. He looked up, finally meeting Steve's eye, and his lips twisted into a sneer. "If I want you, *Steve*, then I'm a faggot. *And I fucking do.* I want you. I wanted you the second he had me. The second I heard his voice, I wanted you. What the *fuck* does that make me, Steve? Because I'm pretty fucking sure it means I'm a fag, and that everything my dad says about me is true."

The last statement actually cracked. His voice *cracked* and Billy hated himself for it. His body hurt. His chest hurt more now (was it actually his chest?), and as Steve demanded a yes, his skin crawled. Fuck. No. *Don't*. "Fuck. Fuck. Fine. Yes, *sir*." Because he had no choice because he *never had a fucking choice*. "Want anything else, Harrington?"

Steve's eyes widened as Billy tore into him. It fucking *hurt*. He really shouldn't have expected anything less. He had pushed Billy and Billy pushed him back. It was what they always did, but now the stakes were really fucking high. He wasn't going to allow Billy to just insult himself like that, and to take what had happened between them and just reduce it to that one fucking hateful word--it really pissed him off. Steve could feel his heart pounding in his chest and his cheeks start to flush in anger.

It didn't matter to Steve that Billy wanted him, there had to be more, had to be more to whatever the fuck this was besides just some fucking around. He wasn't going to risk so much for Billy to just have him fucking throw it all down the goddamn toilet. And when Billy called him "sir," Steve wanted to scream some sense into him. Steve leaned forward, inhaled deeply with his mouth open, ready to yell, when there was a loud knock at the door.

"Are you boys finished in there?" It was the nurse, and Steve was sure Max and Hopper weren't too far behind. Steve snapped his mouth shut with an audible click and stepped back from Billy. He sat down in the chair that Max had pulled up and didn't take his angry gaze off Billy.

Steve looked straight into Billy's eyes when he loudly called out, "Yeah, we're fucking done in here."

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Chapter five for ya'll and it is a doozy. Enjoy!

Chapter 5

Part 5

Billy had asked for this. He had known this would happen because it always does. He says something stupid and it turns people against him. Steve was one of those people. He held still as Steve leaned, ready for anything he was going to throw at him--absolutely anything--and then the nurse called in. He swallowed, and his shaking wasn't because of the pain anymore. His eyes burned and Steve said they were done, and he was sure that it meant more than just Steve helping him undress.

Before the nurse could walk in, Billy reached up and swiped at his eyes again. He refused to look at Steve, finding anything in the room that was more interesting (nothing was). The pain in his chest and stomach didn't feel... physical, and Billy wasn't sure what it was, and he so tried to ignore it. The last time he had hurt like that had been when his mom was around. And he didn't want to look too deeply into that, into *Steve* .

Instead, Billy sat on the hospital bed and waited for the inevitable. The poking, the prodding, and suddenly he didn't care. He just wanted it to be done with because, when they were, he was getting fucking *trashed* .

Steve stayed in his spot, his gaze fixated on Billy. Max walked back in the room and clearly noticed how tense it was. She made no comment though and simply wandered over to Billy's side. She glanced at Steve once, who refused to look at her, and frowned.

The nurse stepped in front of Billy and slowly turned his head up. She started to clean his face and at least she was gentle about it. She murmured, "I think that ear is going to need a couple stitches, sweetie. I'm just going to get you cleaned up and then the doctor is going to examine you. We're going to make sure nothing's broken and if you're okay, then we'll be able to release you with some medication."

Steve made a little noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort, already thinking about who the fuck would force Billy Hargrove to take his medication. He crossed his legs and rested his chin on his palm, keeping his gaze on Billy. He hadn't regretted what he said, but he also knew he had taken it too goddamn far. Billy and he did that to each other, took shit too far too goddamn fast. His entire body still thrummed as if they had actually physically fought and he knew he had to calm down. What happened to being the rational one here? The longer that he was away from Billy, out of the heat of the moment, the more he regretted the whole thing.

Pushing Billy wasn't going to fucking work. He had to lead him where he wanted him to go, and so Steve sat there just thinking about how the fuck he was going to be a accomplish that when he couldn't even hold his own shit together.

Billy could feel Steve's eyes on him, boring holes into his body. He tried to ignore it and clenched his jaw as the nurse tipped his head up and evaluated the damage. When she mentioned stitches in his ear, he let out a harsh breath through his mouth and pursed his lips. Of

course. How long would it take for it to heal? Before he could pierce it again and wear his earring? He looked up at the nurse, finally, and didn't say a word. He nodded, though. Medication. If it was pain pills, he'd have an even better night.

"How long till it heals?" Billy's voice was rough and he knew it was because his chest and lungs burned. He wasn't sure if he wanted to avoid Steve the entire time or if he wanted to talk. Or throw something. Maybe punch that stupid pretty face in. He scowled at nothing and gripped the sides of the hospital bed.

At this point, Billy just tried to concentrate on how long he was going to deal with his wounds before he could fucking function again.

"Mmm, it's really hard to say sweetie. So long as nothing is broken, you should be fully recovered in a week, and maybe the bruises will take another month or more to fully heal." Steve was still listening to all of this carefully, Billy would be up and moving around long before that. Hell, knowing Billy he probably wouldn't even give it until the rest of the weekend.

The nurse slowly cleaned the dried blood off and tended to the smaller cuts. A doctor strode in, barely acknowledging Billy before he simply started to look at his ear. Steve didn't like it, didn't like it at all.

"Alright Mr. Hargrove, I'm going to numb the area and then I think maybe four or five stitches will do it there, alright?" The nurse gently cleaned his ear before the doctor injected it with some numbing. Steve bit his lower lip for a moment as the nurse tended to the back of his head. Both the nurse and doctor were talking to each other about the bruises, what they should do for them medically, as if Billy

wasn't even there. It set his teeth on edge, but he made sure to not say anything as Max took Billy's hand and squeezed it softly.

Billy silently hoped that he didn't have anything broken. Everything hurt, but perhaps not enough to be broken. He glanced up, surprised, when the doctor moved into his space without so much as a warning. He was vibrating again, breath hissing between his teeth as the two moved about him, tending to wounds and talking and Billy was having a hard time keeping his hands from shaking. When his head felt like it was going to explode and he was going to follow it, Max's hand landed on his. He looked down, startled, and then glanced at her. He was dealing with the needle in his ear, with the stitching, with the way they were talking as if he were some goddamn victim.

Technically, Billy guessed he was. But he didn't want to be. He was *Billy*. He wasn't a victim, no matter what his behavior has caused. What he did know, though, was he was going to need an outlet after this. Steve wasn't going to be it, that was obvious, so alcohol and cigarettes it was. And perhaps pain medicine. That was a nice cocktail, right? Just enough to blackout. Not enough to kill himself. A fine line.

Shit. He also needed a haircut. How was he going to manage that? That's more people touching him, seeing the injuries. He ached as he gasped for breath, trying so fucking hard to ignore the doctor and the nurse. But it was becoming too much for him. Fuck. This.

Steve remembered slicing his hand open as a kid, just doing something stupid. His mother had been home and took him to get stitches. He winced in sympathy pain, recalled that strange tugging sensation as the stitches were made and closed together. It wasn't really painful, but just made you very aware of your own body, of its limitations. He had cried and his mother had taken him out for ice

cream. Had Billy ever had anything like that? Just anything...good with his father? He had spoken fondly of his mother, but Steve hadn't asked how or when she died.

He could see that Billy was ready to take off the minute that he was able to, and Billy and Max still needed to talk to Hopper. Goddamnit, he was going to try to run from that, Steve just fucking knew it. He just couldn't let that happen, couldn't let Billy go back to that shit even if Billy hated him for it. He wasn't going to have that on his conscious.

The nurse cleaned the back of his head and Steve learned that he didn't need stitches there. He didn't want to question them, but he remembered just how much blood was on Billy's back. Is this how Billy's father got away with it? Bruises and cuts--nothing so bad he would have to be hospitalized for, something easy to brush off.

"Okay, Mr. Hargrove, we are going to take you down the hall and you'll have a cat scan there. Then we can see if anything is broken, alright? And then I'm thinking amoxicillin for any infection and maybe some tramadol for pain--should make you right as rain." The doctor smiled and Steve couldn't help but feeling angry, that they were trying to rush them out the door. Steve stood up automatically to help Billy up and went to his side.

"...C'mon."

When the doctor and nurse finally stepped back, Billy realized he had been tapping his foot on the floor. It jostled his injuries, but it didn't seem to bother him much, all things considered. He took in a shaky breath when he finally had breathing room. Okay, he was good again. At least, for now. He nodded at the nurse's instruction and

then paused. His hand was still in Max's. He hadn't pulled away. He should have. He should have yanked his hand back, but it was nice having her there, even if she was a snotty brat.

Then, of fucking course, Steve was next to him, ready to help him walk to the damn test. He laughed, harsh and bitter, and then sucked in a sharp breath at the pain. His eyes glittered with rage that had suddenly enveloped him and he sneered at Steve.

"No fucking luck, Harrington. I can manage." Billy felt like he was going to regret that. He knew he would as soon as he stood from the bed. His head swam and his upper body throbbed hard enough to make his heart beat pound in his ears. Shit. The room swayed and he gripped the edge of the bed. He needed to burn the bridge between him and the other teen as quickly as possible because, around Steve, he felt raw and open and *not okay* .

Steve felt his hackles raise and had to bite back that he wasn't fucking asking. He watched Billy, clearly barely able to stand. 'This stubborn bastard.' Steve stood to his side, regardless of what Billy said. There was no way he was going to make it down the hall on his own.

"Look, it's either me or a wheelchair, do you want me to get a wheelchair?" Even Steve thought it sounded cruel, and he knew he was painting Billy in a corner, but there was no other way the blonde was going to accept help. Not after their fight at least. Billy was going to do his damndest to push him away and Steve had just walked right into it with open arms.

"It's just...it's just down the hall, okay? Will you let me do that?" Steve searched his face, tried to keep calm, and he knew everybody

was watching them. The nurse and the doctor may not have known what was going on, but Max knew something was up, and Steve was sure Hopper did too.

Billy actually flinched. He took a deep breath in, trying to calm himself down. He knew the moment Steve touched him, he would hurt, and not in the physical sense. He clenched his jaw to feel the pain, to let it light up his brain and to make his skin burn. After the pain ebbed, he glanced over to Steve and glared.

“No. No wheelchair.” Which meant his only other option was Steve. Max couldn’t hold him and he wasn’t letting the doctor or nurse touch him anymore. And fuck that cop. He shifted just enough so he could settle an arm on Steve’s shoulder for support, but he put as little of his weight into it as possible.

Billy refused to look at Steve. Again. He felt like this was going to go on forever, and perhaps that was a good thing. The less friendlier, the better, because if Neil *didn’t* stay in jail, Steve would end up becoming a victim of Billy’s fucking life. He grit his teeth, spiking the pain, and began to walk (albeit unsteadily), toward the testing center.

Steve held Billy as they slowly walked down the hall. He was being stupid, this was fucking stupid. Billy was hurt and he had lost his fucking temper. He kept glancing at Billy as they walked together, and he was sure Billy knew he was doing it. Steve could see his jaw working and Steve was trying to think of what he could do to make this right. He had never been in a situation like this before, and certainly not even close to anybody like Billy Hargrove.

“Look, I know you--” Steve wanted to say hate, but that wasn’t the right word he wanted to use. It also wasn’t a word he wanted to say,

because if he did, what if it was true? “I know you’re really pissed at me right now, and I get it, but we’re going to talk later, Billy.” No Hargrove.

Steve opened the door and led Billy to the bed of the cat scan. He helped Billy lie down and tried to search his face, tried to express he was sorry for what he said, how he lost his shit, because he knew they had a fucking audience right now and there were a lot of things he *couldn't* say.

Billy tried his best to just ignore Steve. He ignored his stupid fucking words. Ignored his eyes. Ignored *everything* until Steve settled him onto the thin, long bed of the CAT scan. He felt his hands start to shake again because he *hated* tests. His gaze flickered from the bed to Steve and he tried to find something to say.

“I heard you earlier, Harrington,” Billy didn’t even sound *angry* . He sounded exhausted and empty. “We’re fucking done, right? There is no later. I’ll do whatever the fuck I have to so that Neil is out of the picture,” *maybe* , “and you--fuck.” Billy was at a loss at this point. He wanted to say something scathing. He wanted to kick Steve out of his life with a laugh and a middle finger. But there he was, sitting on the table, alone in this dark room with this fucking machine and *Steve* .

“Just. Just get out,” Billy shifted and eased himself back against the table. He was familiar with this machine. He looked away from Steve, and he’d be lying if he said it didn’t hurt.

Steve stood there for several long moments, looked down at Billy, and felt so goddamn unsure of himself. Tears filled his eyes as he stood there, unable to move, unable to speak, and he sniffed once and looked to the side. He tried to focus on the white wall, on the top

coat of paint that was cracking in a few spots. It looked like they tried to use two different shades of white. It was Nancy and the party all over again. It was *bullshit* all over again.

And he and Billy weren't even dating. One tear rolled down his cheek and he felt this sort of clawing panic fill his lungs, desperate for nobody to see what was happening, to see how much it meant to him. Steve quickly turned to the side and dug his fingernails into the meat of his palms. *Bullshit . And you.*

He stood there silently until the machine loudly whirred and took Billy inside the white tunnel there. Steve could feel that he was going to lose it, that he was slipping. All of it was bubbling up inside him and he wasn't going to be able to hold back. He clenched his jaw as he felt those tears still welling up in his eyes and he muttered a curse before he quickly turned out of the room and threw the door open before he practically ran into the bathroom.

Billy heard the shuffling of feet. He heard the hitch of Steve's breath and the usual signs of crying--something that he was accustomed to on his own. He would have looked, would have shifted to see what the fuck Steve was so upset about (he said they were *done*), but he also knew that he couldn't move during the scan. It had him trapped, and he wanted to scream and kick and punch the thing. He also knew, though, that doing that would get the cops back and he'd probably end up in a different kind of fucking hospital. He seethed as the machine whirred above him, imaging his body, looking through his skin, his muscles, ticking marks and identifying how deeply he was injured.

Too bad the machine couldn't look into his head. Billy snickered at that, but he sounded so broken. Fuck this. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the whirring to stop. It continued, for what seemed

like ages, and he knew Steve wasn't there when the small table pulled out and he was able to sit up again (slowly, and with little grunts of effort).

Shit. Where had Steve gone? He hadn't been able to see shit when he heard the guy run off. He blinked slowly and rubbed a hand over his face. Of course, he immediately regretted it, hissing as the bruises and cuts sang out in protest.

Maybe Steve was near?

"Harrington...?" God, why the *fuck* did he have to sound so small?

Steve started sobbing as soon as he was inside the bathroom. His hands were shaking when he threw open a stall door and locked it shut. Steve leaned heavily against the door and covered his face with his hands. "Fuck fuck fuck--FUCK!" He kicked the toilet once and hit his fist back on the door behind him. The entire stall rattled and he sucked in a shaky breath while he looked up at the ceiling.

If he did that, it would just all go away, the tears would go away and he could fucking *think* , fucking not fuck something else up. Tears rolled silently down his cheeks as he tried to calm his breathing, just like he would after a night terror. He gave a soft, small laugh and hit the back of his head against the door. Goddamnit, he was awake. 'Just calm the fuck down, Harrington, don't lose your head.'

He stood there for several moments before the door opened and he heard, "Kid?" Steve groaned. He couldn't fucking handle this shit right now....Steve cleared his throat, tried to make it sound as normal

as possible. “Yeah?”

“We’re still going to have to talk kid. Figure out what we’re going to do.” Steve heard the sound of a lighter and deep inhale. Hopper was not supposed to smoke in here. Steve sighed deeply. “Yeah, I know.”

“Well, if you know,” Hopper retorted, “Then get the fuck out here. He’s out of the machine.” Steve heard this soft hissing noise, probably him putting out his cigarette and the soft close of the bathroom door.

Steve stood there for several long moments before he swiped quickly at his face. When he stepped out of the stall, he glanced at his reflection in the mirror. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath. Steve sighed and hurried back to the room, stepped inside and stood right at the edge. He clenched his jaw, determined not to fucking lose it again, and stared hard at the floor.

Billy hadn’t moved from his spot. He figured if he did, and if he tried to walk, he would get an earful from Steve, no matter if they were done or not. When the guy finally walked into the room, Billy glanced up and froze. His heart stuttered against his chest and his hands clenched. Steve had been crying. Steve was a mess, and it was Billy’s fucking fault. He looked away, but then looked back. He couldn’t feel this fucking bad for making Steve cry. This was something he had done all the time to people, so why did he care all of a sudden?

Because he had seen Steve laugh, wildly, the night before.

Because he had watched Steve’s eyes light up when he touched his

hair.

Because when he had held Steve after his night terror, he felt protective.

Because Billy had felt safe for the first time in years in Steve's bed last night.

Billy cursed under his breath and curled his fingers into the scrubs he was wearing. "I'm sorry." He murmured, low enough that Steve could hear, but not loud enough for anyone else. He closed his eyes and swallowed. That was all he could say. When he opened his eyes, he shifted. Instead of talking, he held out his hand, silently asking for help instead of biting or refusing.

Steve's eyes were wide as he looked at Billy and he took in a shuddering breath when he heard his apology. And just like that the weight was gone. The tears returned to his eyes and he let out a small, choked laugh. Steve looked away for a moment and softly replied, "Me too, asshole." Steve glanced to the side for a moment to collect himself before he strode over to Billy and gently helped him back to his feet. Steve slung his arm around him as Max and Hopper entered the room.

The doctor tried to come in after and Hopper just replied, "No," and shut the door in his face. Hopper looked at the three of them and sighed. He placed his hand over his face and dragged it down slowly. "Look, we need to decide what the hell we're doing now. Nothing is broken so you're going to get released. So I can take your statement and we can get a restraining order and put out an arrest warrant for your father, but I'm not going to get that until Monday because Judge Colloway isn't going to be sober and available until then. So *what* is

the plan?”

Billy sagged and wanted to cry, but he didn't because people were suddenly there and he was incredibly uncomfortable with how vulnerable he felt. He shivered as Steve moved an arm around him, and he didn't feel suffocated anymore. His eyes flickered over Max and Hopper and his heart thumped against his chest. Neil. No restraining order until Monday. He could get a hold of Billy. But then, who was Billy fucking joking? Neil would get a hold of him no matter *what* .

Panic settled into his gut and his mouth felt really fucking dry. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. He was shaking again as he wracked his brain, trying fruitlessly to think of something, *anything* , to keep himself away from Neil.

“I... I don't know. But the statement. You just need, like, details?” And didn't that fucking suck. He sagged back down to the machine's bed because it was *too much* . “I went home after...” His gaze flickered to Steve and then away. “I went home and he was pissed because I didn't ask. We have our usual scuffles, but nothing... I said something stupid.” And clearly, this is where Billy starts blaming himself. “I fucking said something stupid and it sort of. I can't remember much. I remember my earring being torn out. I remember being dragged. My hair was cut. And then it sort of... blanks out. I guess? I can't remember a lot from there on.”

Billy didn't remember begging for Steve. He didn't remember apologizing to Susan or Max. He remembered pain and fear. He stared at the floor as his face paled.

The look to Steve wasn't exactly lost on Hooper, but it was none of his business. What people did in their own homes, leaving him the

hell alone, was of no concern to him. Hopper sighed again and Steve gently squeezed Billy's side. Steve could hear it in Billy's voice, the guilt, the shame, and it was so fucking unfair. Nobody deserved the shit that Billy got, no matter what they had done. Billy was nearly an adult, and it was clear Neil didn't really care that his son was out in the world--Neil just wanted to control Billy, that's all it was ever about.

All of a sudden Max piped up, "I can do it, I can make the statement, I watched all of it when Billy was out of his room." And then all three of them were staring at her. Neither Hopper nor Steve had known the extent of Max's involvement, and when she began to speak, Steve watched Hopper tense up. He wasn't writing anything she said down, but Steve was sure he didn't need to, Hopper would fucking remember what she said, just like he would.

Her breath hitched a little as she recounted getting the gun. She looked over at Billy, "He had taken me hunting before, so I knew--I knew about the safety and stuff, and I knew he kept a gun in there. I didn't want to hurt Neil, but I just--he was hurting Billy so, so bad--" She bit down hard on her lower lip and clenched her small hands into fists. She tilted her head down, her long red hair falling around her. Max made herself angry just to be able to recount what happened to him, describe how she felt in the moment. "I just--I didn't know it was really like that, I swear!"

Billy paused. Right. How had he forgotten about the sound of the gunshot? The blurry image of Max holding the gun? How she had demanded that Neil leave? He blinked as he tried to move through his memories, as jumbled and scrapped as they were. When it sounded as if Max was truly becoming angry, he looked up and fought grimacing. She shouldn't have had to deal with that. She shouldn't have seen it. It should have stayed in Billy's room and not gone anywhere else. He curled his fingers into the scrubs and wished he was better with words.

“Max--it isn't your fault,” Was all Billy could manage because his voice was thick and his eyes burned. “Just. It's okay. You did fine. Probably saved my life, yeah?” When he looked up to see Max, he wished again that he was better at words. At this point, he knew Steve was right next to him, but he was focused on the redhead. He didn't want her to have that anger--that all consuming anger that he did. She was too young.

Billy had been too young.

“I'm sorry, I just didn't know, not like....” Max approached Billy slowly and hesitantly, looked at up her brother, who had always been so much larger than her. She gently took his hand again. “I swear if I had...” But what would she have done? Stopped Neil sooner? Stopped Susan from marrying Neil? She was just a little girl.

Hopper was just quiet, he had enough. Enough of dealing with this, enough for a statement, and enough of domestics. All Hopper wanted to do was get home and watch over a funny little curly-haired girl. Maybe give her a hug and when she would give him a funny look, he would just shrug and say, “Sometimes you need hugs on bad days, kid.” But of course, none of that resolved the biggest problem of all either, what to do about Neil.

Hopper needed to track him down in order to arrest him, and long before that Mr. Hargrove would probably go home. Serve him with a temporary protection order from Colloway, which he wouldn't be able to get until Monday, and make sure he didn't kill the kid sometime before all that. How long would that take until they could go before Colloway again for a permanent one? He had to call CPS and foster care, that would take the kids, what, an hour away outside

of Hawkins? He didn't think Max would leave her brother. That meant notifying the school, get more people involved, get everybody on board and make sure they stay on board until everything in place. It was damn near impossible, kid was going to buckle under all that shit, Hopper just knew it.

Steve was quiet in thought, his brow furrowed. Billy was one thing, but how could he just let Max go back to that too? No, no he couldn't just...watch that go down. When Steve heard Max, he get sick to his stomach. She always took charge, but it just wasn't fair to her. Somebody had to take care of her too.

"My parents are gone for another two weeks, they can both stay with me. I don't know about their Mom, but they can both stay with me."

Billy struggled with his next move because he wasn't an affectionate person, but he knew what it was like to be young and scared. Max was both, and when he had been her age, he just wished someone had been there to hug him, to tell him it was okay. He gazed at her, their eyes level with him because he was sitting. His stomach coiled and he swallowed down the urge to either leave or be an asshole.

Instead, Billy reached his free arm out and slid it around Max's shoulders. He pulled her in gently and rest his forehead against the top of hers. "It'll be okay, Max," Billy murmured but it was soft and almost non-existent. He squeezed her again and avoided anyone else's eyes. He didn't want to see what they thought. This was a private moment that he had wanted as a child. He could do that for her.

When Steve offered to house them, Billy looked up, shocked, and then down to Max again. Now he and Steve would have to actually

talk about their shit, whether Billy wanted to or not. He grimaced and squeezed Max again. He didn't respond to Steve, simply waiting for Hopper to make a decision.

Steve just kept his gaze on Hopper, who muttered a curse under his breath. Steve wanted to do this for both Billy and Max. Steve had grown pretty fond of her, ballsy and mouthy as she was. Max and Billy were probably far more alike than either was going to admit. And even if Neil wasn't going to physically hurt her, and Steve didn't really believe that either, it was going to fuck her up to have to see something like that and not get any help.

Hopper surveyed the three of them with a grimace, "Yeah, I'll talk to Mrs. Hargrove and see...see what we are all going to do. But for now, this can be a very temporary solution without dragging you both off to foster care." Hopper didn't exactly relish putting all of this on Harrington, but he knew the kid would pull through somehow and there was clearly something else there that he didn't want to get involved in. It was still Saturday and lunch had already passed, he just wanted to eat some damn Eggos with *his* kid.

"Get his meds and make sure he stays out of trouble, Harrington, you got that?" Hopper barked, stepped into Steve's space a little as he looked down at him.

"Uh-yes, yes, I got that." Steve stammered a little, felt a little small under Hopper's stern gaze before he clapped his hand on Steve's shoulder, making Steve jump, before he walked out to deal with this shit.

Steve let out a breath and looked down at Billy and Max, he could do that. That would be okay. Just make sure Billy was okay and keep

him out of trouble until this was all taken care of. Suddenly he frowned for a moment in thought. Aw shit, did he just become a babysitter for Billy fucking Hargrove?

Billy glowered at Hopper over top of Max's head. He hated being spoken about when he was in the room (as if he were an object). He tangled his fingers into her red hair and tried to think about his next moves. He would be with Steve and Max at *Steve's house* . How the fuck was he supposed to keep his cool with him? More importantly, how was he supposed to get drunk or trashed if Steve was playing god damn babysitter? He frowned and let his arm drop from around Max's shoulders.

"I hope you enjoy watching me, Harrington," Billy muttered, "Cause I'm one interesting guy." Sarcasm was laced in his voice, dripping, but he didn't care. He shifted on the bed and hesitated. Wait. Shit. He needed to get clothed again, and his shirt was trashed. Not only that, but they'd have to go get shit from the house and Steve was going to see all the vomit and blood on the floor. His stomach turned. Shit. This day just needed to *end* .

"Let's get the fuck outta here," Billy gripped Steve's arm and pulled himself up. He was done.

Steve blanched a little at Billy's words, a thinly-veiled threat. He was fairly confident Billy wasn't going to physically hurt him, well, at least not right now, but all Billy wanted to do was take shots at his ass and now he had plenty of ammunition. Steve suppressed a groan, this was not going to end well for him. Normal Billy, in the best of moods Billy, was a goddamn handful. This was going to be the worst. Steve walked alongside Billy slowly, kept his arm up behind his back and made sure to stop for his medication. He wasn't entirely sure Billy would have even gotten it had he not been there--Steve was sure

that if Billy was capable, he would have sprinted out of this place a long time ago.

Steve could also see Max, right at Billy's side. She held his hand gently and despite how fucked Steve was, he thought it was kinda sweet that Billy hadn't shoved her away. Steve picked up the prescription and slowly headed back with the two in tow to his car. He opened the door for Billy as Max climbed into the back seat.

Billy had been almost okay until they walked outside. He froze for a moment, terrified that Neil would be waiting, but he wasn't there, and Billy was okay for now. He relaxed a bit and slid into the passenger side seat after Steve opened the door. He didn't want to talk. In fact, he wanted to have nothing to do with any of this, but who would? He leaned back against the seat carefully and squinted. How the fuck was he going to manage at school? It's not like he could miss. Graduation would come eventually and he couldn't afford to *not go* .

When his brain finally caught up to the present, Billy tilted his head to the side and looked at Steve. "We gotta stop at the house for some shit, and then we can go to your mansion." He looked back out the window and wondered, vaguely, where he would be if Steve hadn't shown up. A foster home? Shit. He was 17. He didn't need that. He could live out of the damn Camaro until he turned 18. Probably.

Steve frowned and glanced over at him, "Are you sure about that? I mean we can...probably make due. My clothes—well, I'm sure my dad has some clothes that will fit you. And my mom kept everything from when I was a kid." Max didn't seem to care about wearing boys' clothes or not. She was the easy one. But Steve knew how much smaller he was than Billy. He was fucking taller and Billy still was a big bastard, all muscle, and there was just no way Billy would fit into

anything he had but some sweats or pajamas.

Steve really just didn't want to go to the Hargrove household. He had no idea if Billy's father was going to be there, his stepmother, and what would be said or happen. What if Max's mom told her to come back and Max agreed? What if Billy backed out and agreed to go back? It felt risky. Steve frowned as he stared at the road ahead, grabbed his shades and slipped them on.

"At least until Max has had something to eat and you're cleaned up." Steve was sure it sounded like he was worried about himself, but he truly wasn't worried about Neil Hargrove. One of those bats was in his trunk for a reason, even if pulling it out would cause a lot of questions he didn't wanna answer.

Billy glanced over to Steve as he began to drive and he tried not to sneer. Instead, he scowled and tapped his fingers on his knee. He wanted his cigarettes. He wanted his earring. He wanted--shit. Billy felt along his chest and realized that the pendant was gone. Somewhere in that tussle, his necklace had come off. He wasn't sure how or when, but it was gone and he was *not okay*.

"No. We go back. I need to get something, Harrington," Billy looked over again. "Seriously. I need to get some shit. If you don't, I'll just find a fucking ride and do it myself. Pick one, princess."

Sure, Billy wasn't being tolerable, but when was he? Never. He looked out the window and tried to ignore the harsh beating of his heart against his chest. What if he couldn't find the pendant? What if he couldn't... he stared out the window and tried to calm down. He'd find it. It was okay. He would find it, grab his cigarettes, a pair of jeans and a shirt, and they'd head out and he'd be okay.

“Don’t call me--” Steve glanced in the rearview mirror at Max and fuck, she was looking directly at him *again* . Steve huffed and muttered under his breath, “Fuckin’ stubborn asshole....” But he turned his car down the road closer to Billy’s house. Steve grit his teeth and drummed his fingers on the wheel, the car otherwise silent.

“You’re both being weird, why are you both being weird?” Max suddenly asked, her arms folded across her chest as she studied the both of them.

Steve scoffed, this whole day had been fucking weird. ‘Because I woke up to drive Billy Hargrove to the hospital? Because last night we fell asleep together after we both gave each other blowjobs? Because we both liked it? Because I would rather be getting drunk with Billy Hargrove than anybody else in this damn town right after he beat my face in? Take your pick.’ But instead he replied, his voice a little shrill and hysterical, “Because your *brother* drives me up the fucking wall, Maxine!”

She was quiet for a moment before she muttered, “You sound like my Mom.” Steve gritted his teeth and gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white.

Billy’s lips spread into a wide grin and he glanced over at Steve, “I can call you that all I want, remember? I fucking won, I have the right.” He laughed, then, and abruptly stopped when it hurt too much. Fuck. He looked at Steve and wondered if the guy would mind him popping a few of those pain pills. He snorted then and looked out the window. “Basically, Max, Harrington lost a bet and now he’s mad as fuck about it.”

But there was something else in his voice as he spoke. It wasn't anger, and it wasn't necessarily dislike. He just... spoke, that hint of *something* behind the haze of pain. "And hello, I'm not as annoying as you, pretty boy. Besides, isn't it my job or something to do that? Who else is?" He looked back to Steve and then out the window as the car rolled closer to his house. His stomach clenched, but he didn't care. He wanted his necklace. His cigarettes. He didn't give a flying fuck about anything else.

"I am *pretty* sure you beat me on that too, buddy." Steve rolled into the driveway and put the car in park. He glanced over at Billy who was noticeably tense. Steve sighed and got out of his car, opened Max's as she slowly slid out and then went to Billy's door. He opened it and looked down at him. "...C'mon asshole. I'll...get you to the door and then wait outside, alright?"

Steve suspected this needed to be a private moment for Billy. He didn't know the state of their house, everything that really happened, and Steve just remembered the look on Billy's face when he undressed him. Horribly broken. Steve was sure that Billy would have preferred Steve hadn't needed to do that and it just wasn't possible in the moment, but maybe he could do this for Billy. Steve helped Billy up and they walked up the short driveway together.

Billy liked their banter. It wasn't full of jabs, like it normally was, but it was still enough to keep him aware and *okay*. Even as the door opened, Billy tried to keep his concentration on Steve. As long as he could concentrate on something other than the house, he would be fine. He let himself be helped up and walked forward only because Steve was doing so. He was sure that, on his own, he would have locked up and not been able to actually go to the house.

"Thanks," Billy finally muttered. "For everything. Coming, helping,

whatever. Just. Thanks.” He looked over to Steve and then away. Really, he was shit at this whole talking thing. He was much better at physical communication, but Steve already knew that.

When they got to the door, Billy squeezed Steve’s bicep. “I’ll be right out. I just gotta get a few things.” Billy tested the door--unlocked. He guessed it hadn’t been messed with since they left. He wondered where Susan was as he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Steve blinked in shock, a little dumbfounded that Billy had managed to thank him, to say, well, anything like that, but especially that. He didn’t really know what to say and just mutely nodded as he felt this warmth grow in his chest. He sighed as Billy squeezed his arm and was then gone, it didn’t take much for him to feel that current when he was with Billy. Billy fucking Hargrove. God, he was going to be in fucking trouble.

Max followed behind Billy and closed the door behind her after a final glance to Steve, who stood leaning against the side of the house with a weird look on his face. She shook her head a little, they were both so weird. Max followed behind Billy, tried to make sure he didn’t fall again just in case she would have to call Steve inside. Once Billy was in his room, she raced into her own and grabbed her backpack. She quickly filled it with some clothes and her school supplies before she grabbed her skateboard. She wasn’t able to close it when she lugged it over her right shoulder with a grunt, her skateboard under her left arm.

Billy, once he was in his room, looked around. It reeked of his cologne, and now he hated that smell. He couldn’t smell it without thinking about that morning. He made a face and grabbed his school bag. Carefully, because he still hurt (but at least he felt somewhat functional after calming down and getting used to the pain), Billy

packed a couple of t-shirts and some jeans. He wouldn't be wearing open button-downs for a while, not with his chest like this. Once he was done with that, Billy spotted the sparkle of his earring on the floor and sighed. Eventually, it would be back where it belonged. He bent down slowly and picked it up. Now, the necklace. Maybe it was in the hall?

Once he checked around his room and failed to find it, Billy walked out of his room and into the hallway. His whole body felt as if it relaxed when he saw the chain and pendant. Thank fuck. He settled his bag down and then squatted, just as slow as he bent over, to pick up his necklace. He held it in his hand tightly and closed his eyes. He wondered what his mother would say. Probably something soothing, but he wasn't sure what, and he hated that. As years passed, he could still somewhat remember what she looked like, but her voice was gone. He could only ever hear her in his dreams, and even then, it may not be her voice. Just something his mind made up. He clenched his fist around the necklace and opened his eyes again.

Max had pulled up right behind him, her own bag in tow when there was the soft sound of sniffing. Max didn't think as she brushed past Billy and went into the living room, frowning. "Mom?" She stood there as Susan sat primly on the couch, her eyes red and hands in her lap. She looked down, crying quietly and Max stepped towards her but then froze. To the side was Neil, upright and silent in his chair. His voice was low but rang out so loudly, "Where have you two been?"

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

Mel here, I would just like to thank the Goddess that is Rihanna for helping me close this chapter with having every perfect song play on her music channel.

Chapter 6

Part 6

Billy froze in the hallway when he heard Neil's voice. He had heard before he saw, and his skin burned. He sucked in a tiny breath and dug his nails into his palms. The sides of the necklace dug at his palm just as his nails did. He moved one hand, though, to Max, and put it in front of her. He was going to protect her because *no one* had been there for him. He lifted his bag from the floor and looked over to Neil.

"We're leaving, sir," Billy made sure to keep his voice empty. It was better than biting or being angry, and he knew that there was less of a chance of his dad becoming bitter if he just... responded properly. "We were told to stay somewhere else tonight." He was following someone else's orders, and he was okay with that. He glanced down at the blood and vomit on the living room floor and then, without thinking, eased Max behind his own body with the palm of his hand.

If Neil came at him, he'd have to make sure Max got the fuck out. She could get Harrington. Actually... Billy glanced back at her and then at the door. "Go, Max," he murmured. Neil wouldn't put his hands on

her. Billy would make sure of it.

Max whimpered softly as she looked up at Billy, gripped his scrubs for a moment before she raced out the door and slammed it behind her. Susan let out a broken sob and called out for Max before she covered her mouth, wilted on the couch like a dying flower. Neil stayed where he was, his gaze still on Billy.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson from this morning, son? You ask *my* permission to leave, no one else’s.” All of them could hear Max’s hysterical yelling outside, even if they couldn’t make out the words. “You left a mess in my home and I expect to be cleaned.” Neil rose from his chair slowly and lumbered slowly towards Billy. “What have I always told you, boy? And you just never learn-- *respect and responsibility* , without it, this world go to shit.” Neil reached out and grabbed Billy’s chin. He loomed over Billy, he seemed so eerily calm but his eyes, his eyes had that same crazed look in them from this morning. Neil would break him, break him until he was nothing, and maybe Billy already was nothing.

“You think I hurt you? This is nothing, I am *preparing* you for the real world. Is my only son going to be a little bitch or is he going to stand up and be a man?”

Billy relaxed marginally when Max got out of the house. He stood still, even as Neil walked over, and didn’t budge as his chin was grabbed. He looked up at Neil, finally, meeting his gaze. When he did, he let the bag slide out of his fingers and fall to the floor. It was so strange. Outside, with Steve, he had been so fucking confident about going against Neil, but all of that died when he was actually being confronted by the man. It was as if his mind relented and pulled him in, shrinking him back to his child-self who had no defenses, who couldn’t fight.

"I'll clean it up, sir," Billy licked his lips and started to feel his body vibrate again with anxiety. He looked over at Susan, as if that was going to help him, and he closed his eyes. Right. She was as worthless as he was. "And I understand, sir. I'll get... right to it. Just--let me go." He didn't want to pull his chin out of his dad's hand. It was a terrible idea. He also didn't want to ask because he was going to clean, that was his excuse. In reality, he was probably going to turn and walk right the fuck out of that fucking house and never look back again. He'd carry the necklace, leave his bag, and forget that Neil was part of his life.

But who the fuck was he kidding? Billy was hot shit as long as his dad wasn't around.

Neil didn't deter his gaze from Billy's eyes. "Where were you, Billy?" His voice was low and dangerous. If Neil knew that he went to the hospital, that the Sheriff was called, that the Sheriff was going to try to get a restraining order and arrest him--Neil might actually kill him. "You tell me right now where you were, and I'm going to know if you lie to me." Neil tightened his grip on his chin, his thumb pressed hard into the one of the bruises already there. "Did you...call the police?"

Susan let out another sob, she had clearly told Neil what had happened after he left, there was no point in hiding it.

"You tell me right now, boy, who did you tell our family business to? What did you say?"

Billy flinched as Neil's fingers dug into his face, along the bruises. His mind scattered as he tried to find a way to tell Neil what he had

done. Max had called the police, but he wasn't about to tell Neil that. He was also not going to tell Neil that Max made a statement or helped him. The more Max was disconnected from Billy, the better. Billy sucked in a slow breath and swallowed.

"I did, sir," Billy clenched his jaw and let himself feel pain because that was going to be the least of his fucking worries. "I just--I just told them I got into a fight. That was all." Shit. Shitshit. He looked at the door and then away from Neil. Then, he looked back, meeting his dad's gaze, still standing perfectly still because he *knew better*. Part of him wanted to scream at Susan, to rip into her because she put Max (and himself) at risk by telling Neil. He just fucking hoped, like hell, that Susan hadn't told him that Max had called. Then he'd be lying twice, and as much as he wanted to protect Max, there was only so much he could do.

Billy didn't even see the fist coming when it hit him so fast and hard that it knocked him down on the ground. His father raised his boot and put it on top of Billy's left side, pressing his weight down on his ribs steadily and hard as if he had conquered him. "YOU STUPID FUCKING--"

Suddenly the door banged open loudly, splintered at the door jamb, and Steve strode in quickly and approached Neil. His nailed bat was in both his hands as he locked his gaze upon Neil. Steve's lips were pressed together in a grim line as he glared hatefully at Neil.

Neil sneered and then roared at him in the most acidic tone, "Who the *FUCK* are you, boy! Get the *FUCK* out of my house!" Steve didn't take his eyes off of Neil and spun his bat once. His knees were slightly bent with one foot behind him, his feet firmly planted.

“Billy, can you get up?” Steve’s voice was low but his skin felt hot, like he was boiling up inside, just like his last physical fight with Billy. “I need you to get up and get to the car.”

Billy grunted when he was punched and, when he hit the floor, pain burst through his body. He shifted, having immediately put his arms over his face and head, wanting to protect himself. But Neil’s boot crushed his side, pushing into his ribs and Billy could barely breathe. He sucked in quick, tiny breaths of air because expanding his lungs wasn’t an option right now.

It took Billy a moment to realize that Steve had stormed inside the house, splintering the door and boiling with rage. He looked up and blanched. That fucking bat. He looked between Steve and Neil and tried to sit up. He still had a good grasp on the necklace, at least.

“Steve-- *no* , don’t,” Billy wanted to stop Steve, to stop Neil, to protect the teen. He pushed himself up and off the floor after he slipped out from under Neil’s boot. At first, he staggered, and then he pointed to the door. “Harrington--call your fucking buddy from earlier--” the cop, “just call him.”

Billy needed to get Neil’s attention off of Steve, and fast. He wasn’t going to be responsible for Steve getting injured (and why the fuck did he have that bat again?!). “ *I went to the hospital* ,” Billy snapped, hoping to get Neil’s attention. Perhaps if he could, Steve could get a swing in (and where the hell did *that* thought come from?).

Neil took a step towards them and Steve inched closer to Neil in return, his hold on the bat still firm. “Get in the goddamn car, Billy.”

Neil sneered and Steve had seen that look before, right before Billy had fucking punched his face in. Neil laughed, it was cruel and curt. “Oh, I fucking get it--it’s my *faggot* son and his *faggot* bitch!” He turned his hateful gaze on Billy and spat, “Or is that *you* , boy? Are you the faggot that takes it up the ass?”

It was quiet for just a moment, but it felt like minutes before Steve took in a shuddering breath and he boiled over: “You know, I am getting really, **really** fucking tired of that goddamn word--” And Steve turned and swung the bat as hard as he could, shattering one of the lamps there on a end table beside the couch.

Susan let out a shriek from the couch and Steve didn’t even divert his glare from Neil when he snarled, “You can bill Steve Harrington for your shiity lamp! And if you **ever** talk to me or him like that again, I’m going to shove this bat so fucking far up *your* ass that you’re going to taste the nails. You are not the worst thing I’ve dealt with, old man, not even close, you are fucking **nothing**.”

Steve crouched and grabbed the bag that Billy had dropped, backed out of the home slowly until he felt himself back into Billy, “Move it now, Max is in the car.”

Billy flinched when Neil referred to him as a faggot and his muscles went taut. His body ached as he tried, desperately, to keep his anger under control. It wouldn’t help anything, especially since Neil was already passed his point of rage. He had been waiting to be hit, not budging, when Steve slammed the bat into the lamp. He jumped, surprised, and looked at Steve. Sure, he had heard stories about Steve, but he had never actually witnessed the guy being anywhere near the “King Steve” he had heard so much about. He looked back at Neil and then backed up.

When Steve backed up against him, Billy almost grabbed him (because he wanted to get the fuck out). He looked at Neil again, his stomach rolling as he cautiously backed up and out of the house. He pushed the door open, all the way, waiting until Steve moved with him before he started toward the car. He could taste blood again from that one punch, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. The blood washed over his tongue and he swallowed it down.

At the sight of the car, Billy immediately looked for Max. When he saw her, his breath left him in a gust and he looked back at Steve. "Let's get out of here."

Steve backed up until he heard Billy open the door and heard his grunt as he slid into the car. Billy was fucking hurt, he was fucking hurt again, and Steve was enraged at that. He had wanted nothing more than to take the bat to Neil's fucking head until he didn't have a head anymore. Once the passenger door closed, Steve walked around to the his side. He didn't let go of the bat when he wrenched open the car door and got inside. Steve threw the bat against the console and it rested upright in the footwell. He slid into his seat and started the car, and then he peeled out of the driveway without a word.

Steve clenched the steering wheel until his fingers ached. He could feel the blood rushing inside of him, rushing behind his eyes and it flushed his face until he could barely concentrate. He really wanted to fucking hit something and he ground his teeth. It took Steve several moments to realize that several of the nails were pressing into his leg and it didn't really bother him, if anything he found it reassuring.

Billy tensed as Steve slid into the car with that damn bat. He looked

at it and then glanced back to Max, but didn't say a word. At least, not for a while. He picked at the scrubs he had on despite the fact that nothing was there, his gaze set on the road. His gaze kept flickering back to Steve, though, uncertain about what the guy was thinking about. He hadn't seen Steve this fucking pissed before, and he supposed it was warranted, but still, it was *weird* .

"Steve...?" Billy wasn't even sure what to say. He just wanted to hear Steve talk again, even if it was to call Billy a fucking idiot. He squeezed the necklace in his hand. No matter what, Billy couldn't leave that behind. He didn't care if he had a run in with Neil; the necklace was that fucking important. He shifted in his seat and blew out a breath. "Can we put... that thing in the back, maybe?"

The bat almost took off his nuts and he had seen Steve wield it against a desk and a wall. He wasn't interested in being introduced to it again.

But Steve heard him and suddenly slammed on his brakes. Max let out a startled cry and jerked forward in her seat. Steve grabbed the bat and leaned down to pop the trunk. He opened his door slightly and turned in his seat to kick the door open. The overhead light came on and it was silent aside from Steve's feet walking to the trunk, the creak of it opening, and when it was slammed shut.

Billy had seen the one in his room and Steve dimly thought it was probably implausible for Billy to believe that he had grabbed it before he left that morning. Steve supposed he could lie to him, but he didn't really give a shit at the moment. He walked back to his side and slid back into the seat again. Steve put the car back into drive and the rest of the ride was blissfully short.

Steve pulled out his keys and held them in his hand a moment before he fully turned in his seat. "Take your stuff inside, there's some pizza in the fridge." He said quietly and dropped the keys in Max's hand. She was silent, looked between the both of them before she grabbed her skateboard and bag. She left the car and made her way up the walk to the house. Steve sat in the car for several moments, simply watching her silently. He could feel Billy's gaze on him, prickling at his skin, a different kind of electricity there than one he was used to around Billy.

Steve sharply turned to face Billy and looked intently into his eyes, "Please don't ever call yourself that again, if you can help it. I don't...please."

Billy, when Steve slammed on the brakes, cursed under his breath. He had jerked forward, not expecting it, and hissed as some of the bruises stung. He held his tongue, though, not wanting to say anything. Especially considering this was his fault (fuck, wasn't everything?). When they made it to the house, Billy was ready to bolt, to leave the car and *not talk to Steve*. He wasn't so lucky, though, and he slid lower in his seat as Steve handed the keys off to Max.

When Steve spoke, it was like a fire inside of Billy. He breathed in and shuddered, trying his best to keep his temper in check. He looked over to Steve and licked his lips. It stained them red because he had been sucking and chewing on the cut from Neil's punch.

"Why does it matter to you?" Billy asked and then winced. *Shit. Shit*. He did it again. He said something fucking stupid and he was waiting for Steve to snap at him. He clenched his hands in his lap and stared at his knees.

Steve took him in slowly, blinked as he looked over at the bruised and battered body of Billy Hargrove. For a moment, Steve thought his eyes were playing tricks on him again, because despite Billy's words, he looked so small.

"Because you're going to turn into him and I'm not going to fucking let that happen." Steve said it without really thinking, without missing a beat. Everything felt really fast and slow all at the same time, his mouth so much faster than his body. That blood had settled and it felt congealed and thick inside of him, like that was what made him slow. "I'm willing to do this with you Hargrove. You want to be my King, you want a throne? I'll give it to you, I'll give it all to you if that's what you want. But that's going to be your choice to make--not mine."

His words were steady, his tone unwavering as he sat there. Everything was suddenly so goddamn clear and it made Steve feel shockingly level-headed.

Billy felt Steve's words cut a little too close to him, but they were true. He had realized that when he saw how terrified Max was of Neil. He had saw that when she tried to talk to the cop. He had realized that after he had woken up from being drugged and having almost beat Steve's face in (he had). He fidgeted with the scrubs he had on. Billy didn't want to be his dad, but a part of him already was, wasn't it? The temper, the words. He closed his eyes and resisted the urge to bolt out of the car.

At the mention of being Steve's king, Billy's stomach coiled and his heart hurt. He looked up, shocked, and took in Steve's profile The guy wasn't joking. He wasn't taunting. This wasn't some sort of trick,

like most of Billy's life had been. Steve seemed completely serious, and that terrified Billy because that meant *hope* and he couldn't fucking afford that.

"What choice?" Billy chuckled, but it was bitter and stopped almost immediately with a tiny wheeze. "I don't want you to give me *anything* out of pity, Harrington. I don't need *saved* . I don't need coddling. I don't need--" he did. He *needed* , and his body vibrated with it. The sudden wash of emotions was too much for him, so he opened the door and made a move to leave. He *couldn't do this* .

Steve was up like a shot and slammed his door shut as he quickly went around to the other side of the car. He stood in front of Billy, his voice low but a little heated again. " *Don't* , don't fucking run away from me, from this. What happened to you, what's happening to you now is fucking shitty. You don't deserve it. You never did, but it happened and now you got to deal with it. That's not what this is or what I am. I am not--" Steve stopped and looked at the house. Max was in the window watching them and quickly ducked down. Steve took in a shaky breath and it reminded him way too much of their encounter at the Byers. 'I am not going to fucking let you turn into him.'

Steve turned his head back to Billy and his voice was soft, "You don't have to decide now. But right now, we are going to get you cleaned up, cut your hair, eat some pizza, and watch some stupid fucking movie with Max. Are you okay with that, Hargrove?" He slowly reached out and gently touched his hand by the door, laid it softly on top of Billy's.

Billy tensed as Steve rounded on him, ready for either a fist or yelling. Steve was close, but at least he hadn't tried hitting Billy. At this point, he didn't think he had any actual fight left in him. He

tightened his hand on the handle of the door, even as Steve's hand slid over his own, and squeezed his eyes shut. Steve didn't understand. He *deserved this* . He deserved everything his old man threw at him. Even if he hadn't originally believed it, after so long of hearing it, he just... assumed it was true. Steve was the only one who had ever stepped in, who had ever told him he *didn't* deserve it, and his chest ached.

Instead of getting up from the seat, Billy dropped his arms into his lap. He leaned over to avoid Steve's eyes, hunched with his feet out of the car. He breathed through his teeth as hot, wet tears began to drip down the bridge of his nose and onto the scrubs. He didn't say anything, though, his shoulders shaking as he tried to keep himself as quiet as he possibly could.

At this point, Billy couldn't even respond, too busy trying to breathe through his quiet sobs.

Steve crouched down and leaned over Billy. He gingerly slide his arms around his shoulders and pressed their foreheads together. Steve tilted his head up once to press a kiss to Billy's forehead before he pressed their foreheads together. He slide one of his hands gently down Billy's arm and took his hand. He was asking a lot of Billy, he knew that. It was probably too much. With everything that had happened, with everything that Steve had seen. Billy didn't have any walls to hide behind at the moment, no privacy.

Steve frowned in thought and slowly spoke. He whispered against Billy's skin, "What do you need, King Billy? Tell me. Just tonight though, Hargrove, no other night. Just tell me what you need." Steve echoed Billy's words back to him and intertwined their fingers. Billy could focus on the now, Steve knew he was still going to be there for the future.

Billy tensed as Steve's hands moved over his body, his arms on his shoulders, their foreheads together. Steve's lips to his forehead. He felt their fingers intertwine and his breath hitched in his throat. And then Steve spoke, and Billy wanted to cry harder and laugh at the same time at the absurdity of it all. They were *teenagers* . They were thrown into pits that they didn't belong in and Billy had given into the malice a long time ago, but Steve continued to try to be a better person. It was more than Billy could ever do.

"Make me forget," Billy's voice cracked and he hated himself for it, but that was all that he could ask for. He wanted to forget, even if it was only for a little while. He had forgotten with Steve the night before. He had slept soundly for the first time in what felt like years. He just wanted to *forget* . "Please make me forget."

Steve kissed him softly and made no move to deepen the kiss, kept it more the press of his lips against Billy's, tried to convey that he accepted what Billy wanted. He gave a soft squeeze to Billy's hand and pulled back slowly. "C'mon, Max is going to wonder where we are. Up, big guy." Steve slid his other hand gently up Billy's elbow and helped him up to his feet. Steve reached beyond him and grabbed his bag. He slung it over his shoulder and wrapped his arm around the blonde. Steve closed the door with his foot as they made their way up the drive.

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Plenty of fluff and angst for all! Special Happy Birthday shout out to botanicapoetica--ya'll should read the Call & Respond series if you haven't already!

Chapter 7

Part 7

Max was standing in the foyer when they came inside. Steve gently closed the door behind him and made a little jerk with his head towards the kitchen. “Get the pizza out of the fridge, set the oven to 350 and take it out in 10 minutes.” He walked along with Billy to the downstairs bathroom and opened the door. Steve got Billy seated on the toilet and wordlessly turned on the faucet on the tub, he moved his hand several times under the spray until it was the right temperature. He leaned down with a soft groan and plugged the tub before he left the bathroom for several minutes.

The bathroom was by the staircase and Billy could hear the sound of Steve running up and then down the stairs with a small shaving kit and electric razor. He kicked the bathroom door closed and set them down on the counter before he moved to sit on the rim of the tub right across from Billy.

“Still with me, Hargrove?”

Billy had been surprised by the kiss, but not offended. He was weary that Max had witnessed it, but in that moment, he hadn't cared. He didn't complain as Steve helped him up and basically dragged his ass inside the house. The bruises ached, sure, and his head hurt, but it didn't feel as bad as it had before. His jaw ached from the recent punch, and maybe his ribs or killed hurt (because stomping on them would do that), but he wasn't home. He was at Steve's, and so was Max, and he was *okay* with that (for now).

When Billy sat down on the toilet, his gut turned. He knew what Steve was about to do, and he wasn't necessarily ready for it. He had grown his hair out for years, but now it was a choppy fucking mess, and there was no way he could be seen in public like that. He furrowed his brow and listened Steve run up and down the stairs. A hollow pit began to grow in his stomach when he looked up and saw t the clipping materials in Steve's hands. Fuck.

“I thought we were past last names at this point,” Billy didn't sound biting; he sounded just as empty as his gut felt. In all honesty, he never imagined he'd get his haircut. Not like this anyway. “Ever cut hair before, pretty boy?” Not that he could fuck this up more than it already was.

“Believe it or not, sometimes I kinda like to say it. I really don't even know why.” Steve shrugged a little and leaned back on the rim of the tub. He recalled all the times he called Nancy or Dustin by their last names, it just felt strangely familiar to him, intimate in a way he couldn't really explain. When he had first met Billy, Billy had exclusively used his last name—maybe he just associated it in his head.

“I think I gave myself a bowl cut when I was six, but I’m going to go slow and do my best to keep you just as handsome as before.” Steve let his foot touch Billy’s and tried to keep it light. He could see Billy was freaking out, now that he had grown more accustomed to his facial expressions. “But before we do that, I get to strip you down and wash you blondie, c’mon.”

Billy raised an eyebrow at Steve's explanation, but didn't add to his argument. Instead, he snorted at the remark about the bowl cut. “*Harrington*, I swear, you'll regret it if you pull that shit.” He huffed and then tried to run his fingers through his curly, blood-matted hair. He flinched and pulled back. Bad choice. He looked over to the tub and then to Steve.

“Now it's Blondie? Seriously. You've got issues,” Billy stood slowly and stepped up close to Steve. He only had the scrubs on, so it wasn't like it would take forever to get him unclothed. “This isn't what I imagined when I thought about being stripped by you...” But Steve was still there, still with him, and Billy was glad for it. “You plan on bathing with me, princess?”

Steve watched him carefully, his head turned a little to the side. He had issues? ‘Yeah, you have no fucking idea.’ He followed Billy’s gaze when he rose, tilted his own head to look up at him and smiled.

“I don’t think there’s room for the both of us to have a bath. But apparently you imagined me stripping you, so...” Steve reached a hand out and grabbed one of the pant legs. He slowly inched it down a little, right under Billy’s hip bone, and he could see the small patch of hair above his crotch. “How exactly were you imagining that going, Hargrove?” Steve was still smiling, Billy wanted to forget and he

could do that. Hell, Steve was probably really good at doing that.

"I've imagined you doing a lot of things to me, Steve. Undressing is just the cleanest part of those," Billy's lips quirked into a grin. He reached out, tentatively at first, and slid his fingers through Steve's hair. He let his eyelids droop, his blue eyes intense on the other teen in front of him. It felt good to just talk. To feel. To not think about the fucked up situation he and Max were in. No, Steve was able to pull him away from all of that. "But you like this is a start, I guess." Billy would have laughed, but he knew that would hurt. Instead, he tightened his fingers in Steve's hair.

What would have happened if Steve hadn't been there? If Billy had to go up against Neil alone? Or, what if Steve had realized what kind of shit person he was and left him there? He hadn't, of course, but Billy wasn't that lucky. This would crash and burn eventually, and it would probably be Billy's fault.

Steve let his eyes close for just a moment and hummed softly in pleasure when he felt Billy's hand in his hair. He slowly looked up at Billy, who had a slight look of concern on his face and Steve tilted his head further back and kissed the inside of Billy's wrist. Steven nipped there, gently and playfully, before he murmured, "Stay with me, Hargrove." Steve reached out and swiftly tugged down Billy's scrubs.

Steve kept his gaze on Billy as he eyed him, "Get in the damn tub." It took Steve just a moment to rise up, already missing the feel of Billy's hand in his hair, as he wrapped his arm around him so he could help Billy inside the tub.

Billy paused when Steve spoke to him, startled out of his thoughts. That was also strange. Steve just seemed to *know* when Billy's mind

was wandering into dangerous places. Perhaps Billy got a certain look on him. He had no idea, but in that moment, he appreciated it. As Steve stood, Billy let his hand fall from his hair.

The tub was full of warm water and Billy wondered when the last time he had taken a bath was. Or, more importantly, when the last time someone *helped* him bathe. He frowned, but let Steve hold him while he carefully stepped over the edge of the tub and sank down.

The water felt like an immediate balm on his bruises, but Billy wouldn't tell Steve that.

As soon as Billy was in the tub, Steve got down on his knees and opened the sink vanity. There wasn't much there, but a cup, some soap, and a few shampoo and conditioner bottles that his mother wouldn't miss, she kept them around for guests anyway. He dug the items out and turned, sitting upright on the floor with his right side against the side of the tub to face Billy. It was cold against his skin. Steve lined the items up and propped his hand up on his chin.

The truth was now that it was a little quiet, Steve felt really tired again. It had been a long day and the steam of the water made him feel pleasantly drowsy. Steve looked over Billy's face and tried to think of how he was going to cut his hair. Billy might just kill him for real if he did a piss poor job of it, but he could just shape it a little and take him to a barber as needed. Though Billy might prefer not to go out at all, not until he was better anyway.

Billy watched Steve, but he felt... away from himself, as if his mind was above his body and he was an autopilot. That had happened a lot after his run-ins with Neil. It was easier to just escape that way, even if his body was still there. It's probably how he had survived this

long. He glanced over the bottles that Steve brought over and grimaced. "You plannin' on washing my hair for me, princess?"

The tone was a little more biting than he'd like because Billy was *not used* to people caring. If they did something for him, it was always to look for something in return. It was always a trick, a sick way to put Billy underneath their boot. He sank his fingers into the water and pressed his lips together. Regret wasn't something that sit well with him, and lately, when he made jabs at Steve, that feeling welled into his gut. It was unfamiliar and he hated the vulnerability of it.

To avoid Steve's response, Billy sank lower into the ridiculous tub and then dunked his head under water. The silence was there, of course, but so was the ringing in his ears. How long would that be there? He broke the surface again and pushed the curls back away from his face. He may as well enjoy that, too, because his hair was about to be fucking gone. He glanced down and ignored how the water had little swirls of pink in it. Head wounds bleed a lot--so it didn't surprise him. Billy was still avoiding Steve's eyes, set on *not* talking this shit out.

Steve watched Billy carefully and made no comment, it was almost like he was studying him, and Billy Hargrove was an interesting subject. He didn't move from his spot when Billy went under the water, nor did he move initially when Billy came back up. After a few moments he crawled to the back of the tub and dragged the cup that he had found under the sink. Maybe it was to hold a toothbrush, he didn't really know, his mother kept everything,

He could tell Billy was nervous, thinking way too much, but Steve felt oddly at peace at the moment. Steve knew he should probably be waiting for the other shoe to drop, but suddenly with a path before him, he just decided to walk on it. He found it really...reassuring. The

whole situation was fairly fucked up, doing this--well, needing to do this, was fucked up. But at the moment it was all just so heavily compartmentalized that it didn't phase him. It would be done and he would think about it later.

Steve dipped the cup halfway in the water and watched it slowly fill up before he brought it up and poured it gently over Billy's head. He reached out and curled one digit around one of Billy's curls. It would still be longer than his own hair, but not as full as it was in the back. Steve might actually be able to salvage more of it than he initially thought when it had been matted with blood.

Billy flinched, at first, when Steve brought the cup over. It was such a natural reaction because of his day that he wanted to just drown in the tub--not face Steve anymore, but he sat still, frozen, as water dripped over his hair and through the curls around his face. He stared at the water, trying so fucking hard not to look at Steve, not to give into that desire to look at the *one person* who continued, no matter what he did, to try to care. As if this wasn't a trick, as if it wouldn't blow up in Billy's face later (he was sure it would).

Ignoring Steve wasn't really possible when one of his hands reached out and a finger took one of his curls. He looked over, surprised (jesus fuck, Steve was always surprising him), and held his breath. Instead of escaping in his own mind, Billy forced himself to be in the now. He turned his head enough to brush his lips over Steve's finger, even if it forced that curl to slip out of Steve's hand.

"What're you thinkin' about, princess? I'm not used to you bein' so quiet..." He spoke against Steve's finger. Billy would never admit that he was nervous. Was Steve regretting his decision? Was he hating him? He clenched his fists under the water and wondered when he began to give a fuck.

Steve hummed a little and he smiled at Billy. "I'm just thinking about how I need to make sure that I still have the most impressive hair in this relationship." Steve wasn't sure why he used that word, it was semi-definitive, but as soon as it was out there, he honestly didn't care that he had said it outloud. No matter if this didn't continue, there was going to be something there when this weekend was over. Would it be friendship? Something more? Would Billy want to go back to punching his face in? He supposed that was a possibility too. But relationship was the best word he could think of in the moment.

Steve brushed past it and moved his hand again, slid his fingers gently up the base of Billy's skull, mindful of the injury there. He slowly pulled the hair, seeing how far it came out and mentally compared that to what he recalled Billy's hair looking like in the showers after practice. His gaze flicked from the length of the hair to Billy's face. "You know, I really think I may not fuck this up." It lost about two inches, but if he was able to make it fall okay in the back it could more like an actual haircut rather than what happened.

Billy blinked and finally looked at Steve, *really* looked at him. That word nested into his brain and tore at his nerves. Relationship. His skin crawled, his lungs frozen in his chest as he tried to come up with what this *relationship* was. Fuck, he barely heard Steve's comment about not fucking his hair up, so deep in his own thoughts about *them* that stepping beyond that was almost impossible.

And if they did have a relationship, so fucking what? What if Neil found out? So. What. If Billy did this right, he may never see Neil again. He'd turn 18 soon (eventually), and he and Steve could just... be. Hell, maybe he could convince Steve to love the sun and the waves and go to Cali with him. He blinked, suddenly torn from his thoughts, and almost wanted to punch himself. The hell was he thinking? Did it matter? Could they... shit, he really had to stop

thinking about this.

Instead of responding to Steve's comment about his fucking hair, because that shit didn't matter at the moment, Billy reached over and fisted a wet hand into Steve's shirt. He pulled him forward, a quick movement, and grabbed Steve's jaw with his other hand. He tilted his head enough to press his lips over Steve's because he *wanted* a relationship but he was fucking *bad* with words. He slid his tongue over Steve's lower lip and then bit him gently.

Steve's eyes widened in surprise when Billy grabbed him and he grabbed onto the far rim of the tub to support himself. He was dimly aware of the fact that he made a rather embarrassing yelp of surprise when Billy's lips were suddenly on his. They hadn't really kissed all day, because what Steve did in the car wasn't this-it was to keep Billy calm and grounded. But Billy was *kissing* him again and he let out a quiet moan and parted his lips. Steve sucked Billy's tongue slowly, felt that soft warmth spreading from his stomach throughout his whole body as a soft flush rose to his cheeks.

When he pulled away, Steve was breathing just a little harder. Billy just fucking did things to him, embarrassing and beautiful things. His eyes were half open and he let out a small laugh. "I mean....I *can* fuck it up, if it means that much to you." Steve smiled, a little flustered when his hand slipped. He didn't fall on Billy, his reflexes were better than that, but he let out a small shriek and caught himself as he got his entire left sleeve soaking wet.

Billy hissed as Steve sucked him in, took him like they hadn't fought, hadn't said they were done (it still haunted him). His own breathing had become heavy, and as Steve pulled back, his eyes followed him closely. His heart had leapt in his throat, his skin had begun to burn, and his head swam. Yes. He wanted Steve. This wasn't some random

fling for him, and the more his brain harped on him to kiss Steve again, the more he realized that this wasn't going to end for him. Even if Steve ended it, the guy would be sunk deep into Billy.

“Don't fuck it--” Billy tried not to jump as Steve toppled forward, but he didn't. He didn't jump. No, him and his dumb ass self moved forward and wrapped an arm around Steve's waist, his other hand slipping over to his hip to stabilize him against the tub so that he didn't fall more into the water. He grinned as he looked over Steve's flushed face, his large, brown-doe eyes. “If ya wanted to get in with me, I wouldn't of objected, pretty boy.” Even if it hurt to hold Steve like this, Billy didn't care because it also felt fucking *amazing* . “Unless you were just looking for me to touch you... All you have to do is ask. Or beg. I'll take either.”

Steve pulled away as he turned bright red and slid his ass down the edge of the tub so he was sitting on the floor. He had rapidly lost control of this situation and he muttered, “Jesus Christ, I'm pretty sure there's no room for the both of us in that tub.” Of course, Steve didn't say that he would have refused, or that it was a stupid idea, but he could practically feel Billy's grin on his skin as he looked away. Sex was a part of most relationships, and that's what he said this was, right? He was okay with that in theory, he just found the idea a little terrifying and equally intriguing, which only increased his terror. He grabbed the cup and quickly filled it before he dumped the water on Billy's head.

Steve cleared his throat and tried to keep a smile off his face at Billy's sputter of indignation. “Back to work, Hargrove! I have to get you looking presentable, don't I?” Steve grabbed the shampoo bottle and squirted a little onto his palm. He leaned forward, ignored his wet sleeve that was cooling against his skin and begin to gently massage Billy's scalp.

Billy closed his eyes immediately when Steve dumped water on him. He laughed, and even if it hurt, it was full body, his muscles aching. He snorted, finally, managing to stop himself as he gasped for breath. Shit. Ow. He rubbed his palm gently over his face to keep from hurting the marks there more than they already had. He glanced between his fingers to Steve and grinned behind his hand.

“You really are a babysitter,” Billy mused, but his voice got softer as Steve slid his shampoo-slicked fingers through his hair, along his scalp. His eyelids drooped and he sighed. That was so different than what had happened all day. Even their words had been brash and sharp. He felt color seep into his cheeks and he hoped Steve didn’t realize just how much he was enjoying *this* --his fingers, his words, his stupid cute smile. He closed his eyes to avoid Steve’s and held still for him (despite missing the warmth of his body in his arms).

At that, Steve did think for a moment about Max and if she was okay, but she was a fairly self-sufficient child. Steve would make sure she slept close to them, just in case she had her own nightmares to contend with. Steve sighed and murmured, “Apparently it’s the role I was born to play. Maybe I should open up my own business.”

Once Steve thought that Billy’s hair was sufficiently clean, Steve dipped the cup in the water. Without thinking he said, “Make sure to keep your eyes closed--” He stuttered for just a second, holding the cup out as he gaped a little and snapped his mouth shut. “I fucking heard it, don’t say anything if you know what’s good for you, Hargrove.”

Billy was going to say something, he truly was, but then Steve’s voice went all *mom* on him and he started laughing again. Fuck, it hurt, but everything felt light in his chest, even if his body ached. He shook his head and wheezed. “Oh my fucking *god* , Harrington. Should I just

call you mom now?" He paused at that, though, and then tensed. Shit. Okay. That was a little too much, even for him. He licked his lips and looked away from Steve.

When Billy managed to get over what he said, he looked up at Steve. "I don't mind it, really." He murmured, and his voice was full of conviction. He didn't *care*. He wanted Steve to take care of him. He felt a little broken realizing that, and he closed his eyes, ready for the water to be dumped onto his head. If his tears began to mix in with it, he didn't care.

They weren't tears of anger or helplessness.

Steve watched Billy's expression change. When Billy was open, when he was raw, he went through emotions so quickly and Steve watched it happen now with a sort of silent fascination. He wasn't going to ask him about Billy's mother, that would be too much. No matter what had happened today, he had to let Billy lead a little, come to him first. The blonde was used to taking the initiative, and Steve respected that about him. He leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss at his temple, just to more acknowledge that he heard Billy rather than force him to open up.

Steve slowly tipped back the cup to wash Billy's hair. He did it three more times as he studied Billy's body, still and resigned. Steve inwardly groaned, if there was one thing Billy really enjoyed, it was embarrassing the hell out of Steve and getting him flustered. Steve muttered, "Probably shouldn't, you know, call me Mom. It would probably be kinda awkward if I was sucking your dick or something," and even though he said it, he couldn't stop the flush that spread over his face again.

The taut lines of Billy's shoulders relaxed as Steve poured water over him. He stayed that way until the comment and then almost choked. He coughed and then shook his head. "Jesus, Harrington," he grumbled, his eyes flickering up to meet Steve's for just a moment "Although, maybe you could call me 'daddy.'" And then Billy was laughing again because that was *ridiculous* . He ran his fingers through his clean hair, avoiding the gash in his skull, and grinned to himself.

"I think I'll stick with King, though. King is best." Billy grinned still and watched Steve. Honestly, if Steve could pull him out of that sort of tension, he was a saint. "Unless, of course, you *want* to..." And he was snorting again. Jesus. Fuck Steve and his ability to make him feel okay (he actually didn't mind). He breathed in slowly after he managed to calm down.

Steve flushed deeper and his eyes widened. He shook his head and muttered an "oh my God" under his breath. Steve had purposely walked right into that, but shit, it was still fucking humiliating. "You know I really fucking regret that bet because you are *never* going to let me hear the end of 'King Billy.' Once you're better, we're going double or nothing. I am not dealing with this shit forever." Steve leaned up to grab the shaving kit and pulled out a small comb. He hadn't done this before and he gingerly turned Billy's head forward as he began to comb through Billy's hair. He had been right, he might be able to even it out so it essentially looked normal.

Billy's eyebrows raised and he grinned. It wasn't malicious, but it was full of intent. "Round two, eh? I can do that. Probably put you back to bed again, just like the first time." And he didn't complain as Steve eased his head forward and began to gently comb through the curls. He was nervous about that--he didn't let a lot of people touch him in general, but his hair had always been special to him. It was long and curly and thick, just like his mom's. He licked his lips and tried to push those thoughts away.

“And, princess, I can’t lose. What will I call you if I lose the right to princess?” Billy snickered. “After all, your hair is soft like a girl’s. Your eyes are huge. You have pretty lips, and your face...” That was when Billy realized he was complimenting Steve---telling him *exactly* what he liked about him, and he clipped his mouth shut with an audible noise.

Steve heard Billy, but it was just strange to him. He had really never thought of himself like that. When he was King Steve, he charmed his way into girl’s hearts and then rebuffed them when they got too close. All except for Nancy Wheeler. Nancy had been pretty--was pretty--but he was just a guy. Steve was warmed that Billy thought of him that way though and chose not to argue with him. It would just come across as conceited or something, like he was fishing for compliments. Teasing was one thing but a serious compliment made him feel a little uncomfortable, felt undeserved.

So instead he just deadpanned, “Don’t worry, I’m sure you can think of something equally horrifying to call me. Give yourself some credit.” Once his hair had been combed through, Steve grabbed the scissors and took a deep breath. He used the comb to hold out Billy’s hair as he had seen so many barbers do and began to slowly trim Billy’s hair.

Billy rolled his eyes at Steve’s comment and glanced away. Sure, he could come up with something, but it wouldn’t be nice or endearing. He liked calling Steve princess because it...it connected him to the guy for some reason. It was like a secret between them. He let out a small breath and then froze as Steve took out the scissors. Right. Haircut. He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, allowing the sting of pain to distract him as Steve began to take slow snips of his hair.

The blonde didn't even realize that he was digging his nails into his thighs underneath the water. He didn't notice that he had gone stock still, that his muscles were rippling with tension, and that maybe, just maybe, a few tears slipped down his cheeks. He could say it was water, though, as it dripped from his forehead, over his brow bone, and down his cheeks. He bit his lower lip and kept his eyes closed because he didn't want to see Steve's face while he cut his hair.

Steve bit down hard on his lower lip, he could tell that Billy was crying but they had to get this done and he was sure Billy knew that too. He swallowed any comment he had and simply continued to slowly cut his hair. Billy kept most of the length, save for about two inches or three inches. The hair curled there just above his shoulders.

It was really the crown that was the issue. It wouldn't be as full and Steve was a little surprised by how fine the blonde's hair was wet. It looked so much bigger when it was dry and curled. Steve idly thought of a puffer fish or a porcupine, making itself a lot bigger to scare off predators. He wisely chose not to voice these thoughts to Billy.

He cut slowly, methodically, until the crown was essentially evened out. It had already started to curl again as Billy's hair dried. He kept checking the front, scooted back and forth a little on the floor as he pointedly ignored Billy's face, in order to give him this privacy. Steve tapered the hair and it was just a little too flat then at the end. He sighed softly and then stilled, Billy trusted him so he was going to do what he thought was best. Steve took off nearly another inch just so the hair had a bit of a natural flow to it. He looked in the front and back twice more, studied Billy's face and hair from a couple different angles and made a few "hmm" noises in the back of his throat. When he had finished, it really didn't look that bad, and of course it would grow back. If Billy really hated it, he would take him to a barber as soon as Billy was ready.

Steve took in the tenseness of his shoulders and his slumped posture

in the tub. The water was probably a little chilled now. He cleaned his throat and gingerly leaned forward, Steve wrapped his arms around Billy's neck and draped them lightly on his shoulders. He whispered softly in his ear, "I promise you're still really, really handsome."

Billy was startled from his own thoughts when Steve's arms slid over his neck. He sat, baffled, his eyes finally open to what was going on in front of him. He released the hold he had on his own thighs and blew out a shaky breath. At least the haircut was over, even if he didn't actually want to see it. Hell, he'd have to, and he was sure Steve did what he could. Steve wasn't malicious. He wouldn't make him look terrible on purpose, and that made it... somewhat okay for Billy.

When Steve murmured against his ear, Billy shuddered. He wanted to touch him, to hold him back, to let his vulnerabilities show, but this was something he just... didn't know how to do. Instead, he turned his head a little and pressed a kiss to the patch of skin just below Steve's ear. "That's good. I couldn't handle not being handsome for you, princess." He finally reached a hand out of the water to push Steve's hair away from his face. He stroked the strands idly and pressed another kiss to his temple.

"Thank you, Steve," Billy finally murmured. He kept his face against Steve's neck, though, not wanting to actually see Steve's expression when he said it because he *meant it* and he could hear that in his own voice. He closed his eyes again.

Steve shuddered and smiled softly as he knelt there, his arms still gently around Billy. "Yeah. of course." He could feel Billy's breath across his skin, the softness of his words, and a different heat spread through Steve, so unlike when they were grabbing and kissing each

other. They both stayed like that for a few moments until Steve's legs started to cramp.

He whispered, "I still gotta do the conditioner, gotta keep those locks luscious, right? And then we need to go to Max...." He hadn't forgotten about her, and if he strained his hearing, he could hear the T.V. Steve pressed one kiss to the top of Billy's head before he slowly leaned back. His legs were asleep and he squirmed a little until he was in a more comfortable position. Steve put some conditioner in his hands and began to run his fingers through Billy's hair.

"Right, right," Billy chuckled and detangled himself from Steve. He sat back in the water and was thankful that Steve knew how to deal with his moods. He glanced up at the mention of Max and nodded. He still needed to get her settled and make sure she was okay. She didn't deserve that shit, didn't deserve to see it, hear it, know about it. He wanted to scrub his face, but he knew better, so he opted for just sitting there while Steve ran the conditioner through his hair. The silence between them was... okay, so Billy kept it that way, his eyes on the water as Steve took care of him.

How long would it take for his bruises to heal? Not long. He knew that from experience, but how long until he could take his shirt off for gym? And if he didn't, people would notice. How was he going to deal with that? Well, the Hargrove way, he guessed. But it was a small town, and he hoped that news of his father didn't get around (but it felt like it would).

Steve rinsed his hair out slowly and sighed softly. The truth was that Steve relished this moment with Billy, it felt so intimate and he was honestly pleased and honored to be a part of it. He didn't know how long he would stay in Billy's heart, as the blonde tended to sway as much as the wind. And that didn't even take into account that they

were both guys. Steve hadn't even dealt with his own feelings about that. Right now he just cared about the current, the spark. He would have to make time for everything else later.

He rose quickly and felt little pins and needles all throughout both his legs. Steve walked out and grabbed two towels from storage closet. He could hear the t.v. more clearly and the faint smell of slightly burnt pizza. Steve returned back into the bathroom and set the towels on the sink. "Alright, up King Billy, and for the love of God, don't slip in the tub." Steve leaned over the tub and took both of Billy's wrists, pulled him up very slowly.

Billy rolled his eyes and grinned at Steve. "Unlike you, princess, I'm not accident prone." No--just beating prone. He flinched at the thought, but didn't pull back when Steve took his wrists. He should have, but the feeling of his fingers on him won over the urge to pull away. With Steve's help, Billy pulled himself to his feet and steadied himself. The blood rush made his head burn but he blinked it away quickly.

After stepping out of the tub, Billy looked at Steve. "If you grab my bag, I got some clothes in it. I can dry off." He took one of the towels, unraveled it, and slowly began to pat around his bruises. It hurt to move so slow. He was used to being done and dressed in minutes, but this would take a while. He wondered if Steve cared that he couldn't get a handle on his own emotions. He was sure he did, but Billy could only get better, right? It wasn't like he couldn't. He could, but it would take damn effort to do so. He frowned at that and slid the towel over his chest and stomach, then his hips. When he leaned to get his legs, he grabbed the counter and hissed. No. That wasn't happening. Shit.

Steve knew he had been staring for a moment when Billy got out of

the tub. It was hard not to admire Billy's body because, even battered and bruised, it was still incredibly beautiful. And Steve found that he liked looking at Billy, his hair still wet and slicked back a little, little drops of water running slowly down the planes of Billy's body. It was so different from what he was used to, but Steve remembered touching Billy last night and he just felt this *ache* inside him to touch him again, taste him—

When Billy hissed it broke him out of his stupor and Steve cleared his throat. "It's fine, you'll just be wet—I mean like—don't overexert yourself, man." Steve finished lamely, kicking himself before he loudly said, a little too enthusiastically, "I'm going to get the bag!" Steve winced a little and was out of the bathroom like a shot.

He hurried to the foyer and ironically, Max was watching Ghostbusters. He quickly grabbed Billy's bag and rubbed her hair as he passed the living room to the kitchen, earning him a displeased, "Hey!" When Steve got back to the kitchen, he saw a burnt piece of cardboard, which he assumed was once a pizza. Steve groaned softly. He was not going to fucking cook tonight.

Steve grabbed an old pizza box and the phone as headed back to the living room. Steve set the box on the table and dug out his wallet from his jeans. Steve handed her twenty. "You call this number on here, Sal's, and order a pepperoni, okay Max? Just a pepperoni." She made a face, but quickly snatched the money out of Steve's hand. Steve gave her a little look, "Just pepperoni!"

"I heard ya the first time!" was Max's retort as she grabbed the phone, quickly dialed the numbers. Steve grumbled under his breath and turned, headed back into the bathroom, where Billy was hopefully covered back in his scrubs. 'Jeans would be too tight, far too tight,' Steve mused and paused in front of the bathroom door. He

didn't even know what he was doing when he gave it a little knock before just pushing his way inside.

Billy felt like he should have made a snarky response to Steve's "being wet" comment, but let it be. Instead, he eased himself down on top of the toilet seat and sighed raggedly. With Steve out of the room, he could actually look at himself. He glanced over his chest, his stomach, and cringed. At least he wasn't at his pop's house anymore (not that it made the pain any less). He took the towel and rubbed it down his legs. The position had been easier to do it in, and he knew from experience that sitting while bruised was a shit ton easier than standing.

When Billy was done drying himself off, he had just sat there. He didn't bother getting up. He didn't bother trying to figure out his next move. Billy had always been calculating--thinking--planning, and at the moment, he was too tired to think about the next thing, the next moment, his next jab at Steve (if there was going to be one). Instead, he sat quietly on the toilet and ran a hand through his shorter hair. Steve had salvaged it; he could feel that. It was shorter (shit, a lot shorter), but hair grew back, he supposed. He just had to keep telling himself that.

The knock on the door pulled him from his thoughts, and as Steve pushed in, he felt relaxed and tight at the same time. Fuck if he knew why that was possible to begin with. He motioned for his backpack with an outstretched hand. He didn't say anything, though, deciding that he couldn't trust his damned mouth. That'd be the first time he'd ever bit his tongue around anyone but his pops.

Steve entered the bathroom, his mouth already open, when he noticed Billy's exhausted form. He felt a pang of guilt for his earlier thoughts and softly flushed as he handed his backpack over to Billy.

Steve wanted to say something, anything, just to pick up his spirits a little, but he wasn't sure what there was left to say. It had been a long goddamn day and Billy and Max would probably stay with him—at least until his parents came back home. Steve wasn't really sure how he was going to begin that conversation either.

Steve leaned a little awkwardly against the sink and crossed his legs. Billy wasn't beating his face in for his hair, which he supposed was a good thing. Steve bit his lower lip softly. "Uh, Max is ordering more pizza, and they're pretty fast, so....we can just eat and...." Steve trailed off. There was only one guest room, but Steve supposed it didn't matter if somebody took his parents room or if Steve slept on the couch. He wasn't really sure Billy would want to share his room together if Max was already so curious about them. It didn't seem like the best idea at the moment, but he would follow Billy's lead.

Billy took the bag and dropped it in front of him. He ignored the feeling of Steve's eyes on him and rummaged through the bag. When he found what he wanted, he pulled them out and dropped them to the side. He was glad he had thought about sleeping here in his haste to pack, but thinking about it had him thinking about Neil, and how Billy had just fucking shrunk in on himself and let him get manhandled *again* after he had told himself he wouldn't. He clenched his fists and closed his eyes. He was trying to pull his temper in.

"Yeah," Billy's voice was rough because he just wanted to scream. He wanted to kick something all of a sudden and he hated that his emotions were so out of control. He looked down at his sweats and t-shirt and swallowed. He had to keep it cool. He had to keep his head because Max was upstairs. He tugged his shirt over his head and pulled it carefully over his chest and torso. Then, without looking at Steve, he pulled the sweats on. He let them hang low off his hips.

“Whatever we gotta do, we’ll do,” Billy stood from the toilet seat and slowly rolled his shoulders. It was an attempt to stretch out his bruised muscles, but it didn’t work. He clenched his fists again and then released them. Shit. He needed to calm down. “I gotta smoke. Outside, right?” He dug his pack from the side pocket on his bag and turned toward Steve, finally looking at him.

Steve gave an apologetic shrug and a small smile. “Yeah, my mom is a bit of a bloodhound, sorry.” Steve looked Billy up and down and wanted to grab him again, help him outside, but he could tell that Billy wanted a little space at the moment. So instead he frowned and backed a little out of the bathroom, opened the door, and stepped out. Steve stayed in the hallway and simply watched Billy make his way past the kitchen, to the sliding glass doors. Billy would be outside of the pool and Steve couldn’t help lingering there for several moments. He didn’t like anybody being out there, not now, and certainly not by themselves.

Nancy had told him once that he was being silly, that it wasn’t the pool specifically that was the issue, but sometimes Steve just got this sinking feeling that his house was next to a grave. Steve had spent a couple nights lounging on the chairs there, his bat beside him as he got wasted. He felt stupid, standing there, chewed his lower lip, before he grabbed something to drink for Max and himself. Steve told himself he still wasn’t watching Billy before he walked into the living room and set down the cups. Steve sat down on the far end of the couch and crossed his legs, nervously bounced one.

Billy, once he was outside, welcomed the fresh air on his skin. He breathed it in deeply, and even though he was about to pollute his lungs with smoke, he appreciated the outside air. As he stood there, thoughts of Steve and this house kept crammed themselves into his head. He had to do a report. He needed to go to court. He needed to protect Max. He shuffled his pack of cigarettes, took one out, and despite his shaking hands, he flicked his lighter until the thing was

lit. He sucked in a deep breath through the useless filter and closed his eyes.

How had it ended up like this? One second, he was drunk as fuck with Steve and enjoying himself. Now, he and Max were victims of domestic violence and crashing at Steve's because they had no choice. He bit down on the filter and scowled. Shit. He took another long pull and then took the cigarette out of his mouth. He was in pain, sure, but he was also anxious, and whenever he got like this, pain was secondary. He dropped his cigarette and stomped it out.

But Billy didn't go inside. He stood, rigid, trying to sort out his thoughts so he didn't say something stupid to Max or Steve. Instead, he tugged out another cigarette and lit up again. Maybe he would just stay out here. Sleep on one of the lounge chairs. It wasn't that cold, after all. He ran his fingers through his shortened hair and cursed around the cigarette.

Steve sat there for several long moments. He grabbed his drank and Max's. Steve refilled them once. And then twice. The pizza came and it was sausage and mushrooms. Steve let out a long sigh and glared at Max, who happily grabbed a slice with a smile on her face. Billy still wasn't inside when Steve had to change the movie. Still wasn't back inside when he had to debate with Max about which movie they should put on. And Billy still wasn't back inside when he went into the kitchen to refill their glasses for the third time, Max's still full.

Billy's back was to him when he took a deep, shuddering breath and opened the door. Steve's smile was a little tight, "Hey, the pizza's here, come on inside."

Billy felt stiff at this point. How long had he stood there, lost in his

thoughts? He closed his eyes when he heard the sliding door open and pressed his lips together. He didn't want to go inside, and his posture showed it. He turned to Steve, though, and dropped his fourth--maybe fifth--cigarette to the ground. He blew the smoke out above his head and licked his lips.

"I like it out here, Harrington," Billy was trying to be careful. He was already on edge because he had been drowning in his thoughts before Steve came out. He just had to... watch what he said, and he would try. Fuck, he would try.

Steve's face fell for a moment and he felt this churning in his gut. No, that was not happening. Steve forced a smile onto his face and tried to make it look as genuine as possible. "Well, you need to eat something, so just come in. Max got sausage and mushroom, it's not pepperoni, but it's not bad. C'mon in." Steve knew that the blonde was perceptive, way too perceptive, and he was doing his damndest not to give anything away. Just be nice, lure him back inside where Steve could keep an eye on him. That was all.

Steve leaned against the door and in a moment he changed his posture ever so slightly, trying to make himself look--well inviting, as he smiled still. "You'll smoke your whole pack at this rate."

Billy cocked his head to the side and watched Steve, scrutinized the way he moved, the lilt in his voice, how his body tensed. He had been around the teen long enough to know when something was up (and, hey, Billy wasn't a fucking moron). He glanced around the pool, the chairs, and then back to Steve. Something had happened here that made Steve weary, and Billy wondered if he should push it, should poke at the buttons that Steve so obviously had. It was itching under his skin. Just do it--get into an argument, get into a fight, make this feel *normal* again. Billy *hated* feeling like a victim, and that's

what he felt like as he stared at Steve.

Instead, Billy walked up to Steve. He settled his arm above Steve's head, against the frame of the door, and leaned in. They were close enough that Billy could breathe Steve in. "What's in it for me, Steve?" He ignored how his body ached. Fuck that. If he wanted to get a rise out of Steve, he'd do it, but not in his shitty-ass way that he normally did. Fuck, he didn't even care that Max was near. What else could Billy possibly lose? His mom, now his dad, and what the fuck did he care if Max knew about him?

Steve let out a small relieved sigh and smiled at Billy, just having Billy a little closer inside eased his tension. He licked his lips at Billy, "Well, what do you want?" Steve tried to make it sound as casual and flirtatious as possible, even if he hadn't flirted with Billy before when he was fully sober. Hell, if it got Billy inside the house, Steve would gladly blow him again. The smile was still on his face when his gaze drifted over Billy's shoulder. He couldn't see anything beyond the pool, nothing in the trees, no twisted shapes or rapid movement.

The problem was when Steve gently reached out and touched the top of Billy's sweat, played a little with the waistband, with that smile still on his face. Steve watched a little calculating flicker in Billy's gaze and Steve realized he'd overplayed his hand.

Billy had an idea on Steve's limits. He understood where he started and normally where he ended, but this was new. Whatever was bothering Steve was really fucking bothering him. After the day that they had together, he figured Steve had already seen enough. Perhaps that was just a cakewalk for him, considering the way he kept looking over Billy's shoulders and into the yard. No, something was up and Billy had a new goal: figure this shit out.

“That’s a little forward, pretty boy,” Billy stepped back out onto the porch and spread his arms to the side. “What’s wrong with this place? You keep lookin’ behind me like there’s something back here.” Billy turned around and carefully made his way to the front of the pool, where the water sloshed along the steps. He gazed into it and then began to walk along the edge. “Like some damned ghost or something. Spill, Harrington.” He hadn’t looked back yet, instead watching the water move.

Steve tried to control this wave of panic that crashed inside him as he let out a laugh, just a little too high, “I’m not doing anything, you’re being stupid, Hargrove.” Steve smiled until Billy backed away from him, made his way to the pool. No, no, no, Steve didn’t like this. His palms started to sweat a little as he slowly moved away from the porch. Steve kept his gaze on Billy as he pressed his hands to his thighs, tugging slow but hard at the seam of his jeans. “Just come inside.”

The closest bat was in the tool shed, but if something came at Billy, he wouldn’t be able to get to it quick enough before it got him. Steve slowly made his way closer to the pool and closer to the tool shed. He kept his gaze on Billy as he scanned the area around them. The pool filter turned on as Steve stood there, both of them illuminated by the lights of the pool. Steve swallowed, he knew he had given too much away, but he just *needed* to get Billy away from here. “We can swim tomorrow afternoon if you want, c’mon.”

“Nah, see, Harrington... there’s something else going on here. You’re freaked out.” Billy was so intrigued by Steve’s behavior that he wasn’t necessarily paying attention to his own pain. Then again, Billy was used to pain. He was used to aching and being pushed further and further down, so after the initial shock and the new blows stopped coming, he became used to what his body felt like. It was an

all-over ache, but an ache he could manage.

When Billy looked back, and he saw the way Harrington was either trying to come to him or the tool shed, he became distracted. His footing became jostled, and because he was an idiot and not paying attention to the swoop of the pool's construction, Billy toppled over with a huge splash. When he broke the water, a noise close to a 'woop' came out of him and he laughed (even if it hurt).

"Shit, *shit* , this thing is heated?!" Billy blew water out of his mouth and then paused. Shit! He still had his smokes and lighter in his hand. Well, they were fucked. He snorted and tossed them onto the concrete. Well. So much for smoking. He ran his fingers through the water and ignored how the chlorine burned his split skin. "I guess I'm swimming now, princess."

The color drained from Steve's face as he saw Billy fall in the pool, it felt like slow motion, like everything he had seen in a movie where time just stood still and he was frozen in that spot. Even when the blonde came up, sputtering and laughing, it didn't stop Steve from letting out a yell of horror.

Steve had a lot of nightmares about Barbara when he was with Nancy. He felt this tremendous amount of guilt when he finally discovered how she died, and when he thought about just how little he used to care about it, it sickened him and made him feel that much worse, as if Steve caused it himself.

Steve didn't even think when he jumped into the pool and swam up to Billy. Steve grabbed him and pulled as hard as he could until they were at least in the shallow end—Jonathan's last photo of her had been by the diving board and some small, childish part of Steve felt

that they were marginally safer when his feet could touch the pool floor.

Steve would regret it later, but his eyes were wide, searching, and his voice was shrill and a little hysterical when he yelled, "What were you *thinking* ?! What the fuck is wrong with you!!" Steve was shaking in anger as he held onto Billy's now soaked t-shirt. Steve started to pant so hard that he could feel his vision pull and dim just a little around the edges as his fingers curled in the fabric.

Billy froze in the water, surprised by Steve's sudden distress. When the guy got in the water and man-handled Billy to the shallow end, he was more confused than anything else. Confused and concerned because Steve looked like he was ready to burst. When he finally managed to get his thoughts straight (because seeing Steve unravel was so fucking hard), Billy caged Steve against the pool's wall and leaned in as closely as he could without kissing him. He stared into Steve's eyes and scowled.

"What the hell, Harrington? Calm the fuck down. It's a pool. I know how to swim. It's not like I'm going to drown. Jesus fucking Christ," Billy pulled his hands from the roughness of the wall and cupped Steve's face, forcing him to stay still. "Calm down, Steve. Calm down. It's okay. Look, I'm okay. I'm here." The bat came to mind. That nail ridden bat, and now the pool. Something fucked up had happened and Billy wanted to know *now* . "What's going on, Steve? Why the fuck are you freaking out?"

And before Billy could get an answer, he moved one of his hands down to hold Steve's hip. He kept the other on his face. This way, Steve couldn't move away, couldn't pull, couldn't keep avoiding his questions. "Steve, answer me."

Steve's eyes were wide as Billy searched his face, studied Steve for any kind of clue that would give him away. He felt Billy's hand on his hip and the other held his head in place. Steve wanted to deck the guy, shove him away, tell him to fuck off, just anything he could to get out of this moment, but Steve knew he couldn't. Despite Billy's injuries, Steve was well aware of how strong Billy could be if he wanted to. Steve might be able to hold his ground, but he would be buying time—not able to actually win. Not to mention, Steve didn't want to actually hurt Billy, none of it was his fault.

Billy's gaze was unwavering and this dam just broke inside of Steve and he let out this soft, broken sob. Steve saw Billy's eyes widen just a little as he watched him. Steve closed his eyes tightly and raised his hands, covered them over his face as he rapidly shook his head. "It's nothing, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine—"

"Stop lying to me," Billy's voice was low now and held no room for excuses. "Stop lying to me, princess. You're fucking crying and you're fine? Have we not gotten past this? Just talk to me." Part of it was the pool. Billy knew that, so he eased the hand that was on Steve's hip to his side, his arm tucked firmly around Steve's much smaller waist. He eased back, toward the stairs, the water rippling around them as he basically dragged Steve where he wanted him to go. Once he was at the stairs, Billy found his footing and continued to pull Steve along until they both stumbled out onto the concrete.

Before Steve could get away, Billy fisted his hands into Steve's shirt and pulled him close. "Tell me, Steve. Stop running from me. You want me to tell you shit? You do the same fucking thing. You tell *me* . Tell me, and I'll tell you." Just like they had when they were drunk, but they were both stupidly sober and stupidly upset. None of this made sense to Billy, but he didn't care. He wanted information and Steve wasn't going to get away from him until he *told him* .

Steve felt numb as Billy led him up out of the pool. His entire body taut and shaking, and not from the chilled air. The problem was that Steve *couldn't* tell Billy, no matter how much he wanted to. Part of him wished he had shared these thoughts with Nancy when he was with her. Even if she had it worse, even if it was selfish of him, she would have understood. But how could Billy understand? How could he tell him without putting his life in danger? So Steve settled for what he could tell him.

Steve let out a soft, bitter laugh, not nearly as upset now that they were out of the pool. He was still shaking, but he was sure that was from the adrenaline. "That-that girl from our school, Barbara? The one on the news this week? She died here, Billy, and-and I don't give a flying fuck what they're saying on the news, it was *my* fucking fault, okay?? Because I cared more about fucking Nancy than being a fucking decent human being—and that's on me! Because as much as you want to fucking think these wonderful fucking things about me, I'm a piece of *shit*, Billy! I'm a fucking piece of shit!"

His voice was getting a little hysterical again, but the words just fell so easily from his mouth. He laughed, and it was bitter and loud and hurt his throat, "And now, NOW, I don't fucking sleep! My parents are never fucking home and I fucking love it Hargrove, I fucking *love* it, because last night—how the *fuck* am I going to explain what you saw to another person!"

Steve started laughing louder then and just threw his hands up in the air before he spread his arms wide and made a small flourish, gave a little bow to Billy. "So congratulations my *liege*, you managed to find out just how fucked up the former King of Hawkins is! Happy!" Steve was panting and his arms fell to his sides.

Billy hadn't expected that. Yes, he had heard about the girl who had died. He didn't know it was here, and he didn't know that Steve was involved. Yet, that made sense. The whole thing with how Steve acted--on guard, terrified--it made sense. He flinched as Steve pulled away and his blood began to bubble with anger as Steve swooped into a stupid bow and called him that stupid fucking name. He scowled and wanted to grab Steve, to shake him, to throw him to the ground and make him *stop* .

But Billy had asked for it, and now he had it.

"Everyone is fucked up in their own way, Steve," Billy watched Harrington closely, as if he was ready to grab him if he bolted. "But you didn't kill that girl. If you did, you'd be in jail. I'm calling bullshit on that. What happened while you were trying to *fuck Nancy* ," he said it with disdain, as if he hated the idea, "isn't your deal. If you were with Nancy, how the fuck were you killing Barbara? You in two places at once, or are you bullshitting yourself?"

Steve laughed again, and even though it was still bitter, his voice wasn't raised, "Since when did you become the fucking rational one? Haven't you heard, Hargrove? All I am is *bullshit* ." Steve's face fell and he felt like he was collapsing in on himself as he screwed his eyes shut. It was so damn quiet except for the lapping of the pool and his own breathing. Is that the last thing she heard too? He began to cry in earnest then, his shoulders hunched as he felt these great waves of shame and embarrassment crash over him. Steve covered his face with both hands.

If he was attacked right now, he could turn this off. Act in the moment. He was good at that. Steve almost wanted it to happen, anything other than this fucking stillness that killed him--the same stillness that always happened at night. Steve was fucking up again,

he just felt like such a fuck up and he barely registered that he said as much.

Billy's lips twitched and he fought the urge to frown. Steve was off in his head somewhere, remembering something that Billy wasn't a part of, and he wanted him *there* with him. He narrowed his eyes and walked forward enough to crowd Steve's body. "I don't give a fuck what you think you are, or what these fucks think you are, you are *not* bullshit. You may spew bullshit, but you aren't bullshit. If you were, I probably wouldn't be standing here now."

Instead of throwing a punch or pushing Steve, Billy wrapped an arm around his waist and hauled him to his body. He ignored the complaints from his bruises and dug his fingers into Steve's back. "Jesus, Steve. You're not bullshit." He knew what it was like to be called things--really terrible things--so the idea that Steve believed that made his stomach turn. He pressed his lips to Steve's forehead and sighed. "Look. Why don't we go inside?" And Billy would have to fucking apologize, again, for pushing Steve to the brink when he was already doing so much for him. Fuck. He squeezed Steve to him and then pulled away. "Come on, Harrington. Let's get you out of those clothes."

Steve stood there silently as Billy wrapped his arm around him. Billy touched him with this tenderness that Steve had seen a few times already. This warmth and depth that Steve just knew was inside Billy, one that pulled Steve in closer, like a moth to a flame. He was still just standing there when Billy pulled back and asked him to go back inside and Steve couldn't even think of what he was supposed to say. There was just this rush of warmth and Steve watched numerous emotions move across Billy's face, a little unease was there, as if what he was doing was wrong.

Steve reached out and placed both of his hands on Billy's cheeks before he pulled the blonde into a deep kiss. He tried to pour all of his emotions into that moment, his attraction to Billy, his regret that Billy was the one helping him when all he was supposed to do that night was help Billy forget, and his undying gratitude that Billy had stepped up to do this for him, pushed him. Even if Steve hated it, he felt that release throughout his whole body. Everything that he thought, everything he was going through--at least somebody knew about it. Steve pulled back for a moment, their foreheads touching, as he whispered, "All you wanna do is get me out of my clothes..."

Billy didn't expect the kiss, but fuck, he wasn't complaining. He tightened his hold on Steve's body, pulling him so far against him that it felt as if he wanted to consume him. He opened his mouth and let Steve have control, if only for a little bit, sharing his breath and his passion. He slid a hand down and gripped Steve just above his ass. He dipped his tongue into Steve's mouth, tasting him, and he sort of regretted chain smoking. Steve tasted like drink and pizza and *him*, and Billy was sure he tasted like cigarettes. He nipped Steve's lower lip and smiled, but it was smug.

"I don't have to use an excuse to get you stripped, Harrington," Billy murmured and stroked his thumb along Steve's lower lip. He pressed a kiss to Steve's brow bone then and shivered. Damn, it was getting colder the longer he stood in the clothes "Now, let's go get something else on, yeah?"

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

If you've made it this far, here's some well deserved smut and fluff.

Steve nodded and kissed him softly then, took Billy's hand and led him back inside. Both of them were still dripping wet when Steve reached out towards the wall. He hesitated a moment before Steve flicked the outside light off. He walked to the foot of the stairs and glanced back at Billy, gave him a little smirk. "Your clothes are downstairs, Hargrove. Right?" He still had that little smirk on his face as he went half-way up the staircase, knowing Billy was watching him.

Billy paused as Steve took his hand and led him inside. He glanced at the stairs that led down and then toward Steve. This was interesting. "Yes, they're downstairs..." But he didn't complain. Hell, no, he followed Steve up the stairs (where wouldn't he follow him?), his curiosity out-weighting the idea that he should probably grab his bag. The way Steve moved made his heart thump and his stomach coil. If Steve was fucking with him, he was going to have the teen up against a wall in no time. He licked his lips and squeezed Steve's hand. "What're you thinkin', Harrington...?"

Steve paused for several long moments, and it almost looked like he was going to tell Billy to get his ass back downstairs before it was apparent that he was listening for Max, for the sound of the t.v. Steve locked his gaze on Billy and bit back a smile as he squeezed the blonde's hand. Steve slowly led Billy into his room and closed the door, locked it, before he quickly took off his shirt and dropped it with a soft plop on the floor. Steve's eyes were bright as he searched Billy's face mischievously, "Can you be quiet for me?"

Billy walked back into Steve's room and glanced at the holes he remembered were left from the bat. He glanced back to Steve and grinned, slow and wicked. "I can be quiet, princess. I think you're the one you need to worry about." He didn't make a move to do anything, though, clearly giving Steve the control because after what he saw... Steve needed it. He needed to feel like he had something in his hands, and if that thing was Billy, he'd be fucking willing. He would never deny Steve--ever.

Steve made a little face of embarrassment as he recalled the noises Billy was able to pull out of him...before he smiled widely and leaned in, gave Billy a quick kiss and made sure to nip at his lower lip. "Yeah, well, we'll see about that. Shirt off, blondie." And then Steve dropped unceremoniously to the ground. Steve pulled agonizingly slow at the waistband of Billy's sweats, still looking up at him with a little grin.

Billy licked his lips after Steve nipped at him. He liked this--he liked how demanding Steve was. It was a weird shift, but he wasn't going to complain, especially if Steve was going to look up at him like *that* . He held his breath as he looked down, almost too distracted to actually pull his t-shirt off. After he realized that Steve had given him instruction, he tugged the shirt slowly up and over his head and dropped it to the side. Then, he reached down and slid his fingers through Steve's hair.

"Hey, gorgeous," he murmured. It was sincere, too, low in his chest as he stroked his fingers through Steve's hair.

Steve's smile faltered for just a moment, but he knew Billy was being sincere. He flushed at his words and swallowed, turned his head a little and kiss and nip a little at his hand before he laughed softly. Steve felt stupid and giddy as he tugged Billy's sweats down, it was

painfully clear what he was going to do, but there still some part of Steve that just went: 'I am on my knees, about to suck off Billy Hargrove.' And it felt so ridiculous, but it also really turned him on. Steve reached out to gently grip Billy's cock before he take the head in his mouth, at least there wasn't cologne this time.

Billy's eyelids fell half-way and his lips parted as he watched Steve take him into his mouth. He twitched and strengthened his hold in Steve's hair--not enough to hurt, but certainly to let Steve know he was there. His other hand went to Steve's face, his thumb moving over his lower lip as it stretched over him. Steve was gorgeous, yes, but even more so with his growing cock in his mouth. He grinned and tilted his head. "You keep surprising me, Harrington. I never know what to expect from you," his voice was low and soft, careful, because he didn't want Max to hear. He tugged at Steve's hair and then stroked his fingers across his scalp.

Steve moaned softly on Billy's cock and felt a little flustered as Billy somehow still pulled noises out of him when he was the one on his knees. His cheeks flushed darkly, felt Billy's hands in his hair and on his face. It was hard to articulate how Billy made him feel, but special, appreciated, those were some of the things that Steve thought as his heart pounded in his chest. Steve tilted his head back a little and took more of Billy's cock in his mouth. If they did this more often (and Steve *wanted* to do this more often), he was going to have to get better at this. Steve moaned again, the sound vibrating slightly on Billy's cock as he grabbed the blonde's ass and squeezed softly. He was aware that Billy had a few bruises on his hips, but that wasn't what he wanted to grab anyway.

Billy hissed as Steve began to *moan* around him. That was absolutely filthy and Billy loved it. He liked how wrecked Steve looked already, sucking and pulling at him like it was his job. He paused when Steve's fingers dug into his ass and his breath hitched a little. He'd never admit that that was a turn-on for him because...it didn't seem

like a guy should like it, so he ignored it, but pushed his hips forward a bit, sinking deeper into Steve's throat. He groaned and ran his fingers through his hair again. Eventually, he wouldn't be able to just stroke his hair. He'd be clenching it, and he knew to be careful. While he didn't mind making some people hurt, Steve wasn't one of those people.

Steve felt some tears collect in his eyes and he closed them, tried to concentrate on what he was doing and take more of Billy into his mouth. It was more difficult than he expected and he could already feel a few twinges in his jaw as he sucked steadily, his fingers pressed a little harder into the meat of Billy's ass. Steve took too much once, choked slightly around Billy and did his best to breathe through his nose to not jerk back. Steve could feel saliva pooling a little in his mouth as he barely opened his eyes and looked up at Billy.

"Shit, princess," Billy breathed. He grunted as Steve's fingers dug harder into his ass and it made his cock twitch in Steve's mouth. He tried not to pant, but his lungs betrayed him, needing more oxygen than he wanted, and he shuddered as he began to rock his hips, gently, against Steve's mouth. He moved his hand over his cheek and hooked his thumb into the corner of Steve's lips. He groaned as it forced some of Steve's spit to slick over the pad of his finger. Shit. Fuck. He grinned at Steve once he realized the guy had opened his eyes. "You look filthy, Steve." He slid his thumb over his lower lip, smearing the spit along there before pushing his cock further into Steve's throat. He knew he should give him time, let him get used to the idea, but he was fucking gorgeous like this and Billy just wanted to *wreck him* .

Steve choked again around Billy and did his very best to look pissed off that Billy did that, at least as much as he could in the moment, and he dug his blunt nails into Billy's ass as a result. Steve's cheeks heated up as Billy spoke to him and he hated that it really humiliated and turned him on. He never spoke dirty to any of the girls he had

been with, certainly not Nancy, but Billy was a far cry from everybody he had been with.

And Steve realized he was really turned on, sucking Billy off, listening to the hitch of his breath, feeling the stutter of his hips. Even if he got Billy off, it wasn't like he could walk around the house like this, Max was here. He hadn't forgotten that, no matter how much of his attention he focused on Billy. Steve's flushed darkly as he let go of Billy's ass for a moment and reached down to his own jeans. He unzipped his fly while he kept Billy inside of his mouth, and he knew the blonde was watching him the entire time.

Billy chuckled at the look Steve gave him after he choked. It was pretty cute compared to the normal looks he got, especially when he pulled shit like that. However, as Steve's nails dug into his ass, he moaned. He clipped his teeth over his lower lip to muffle it. The bite of pain on the skin was good, and of course Billy liked it (he knew he shouldn't). He had closed his eyes at some point, but opened them again to look down at Steve. He watched, breath held in his lungs, as Steve undid his jeans and moved to stroke himself. That made Billy's knees weak and he hissed.

"Y'wanna swallow my cum, pretty boy? 'Cause if you don't, I need to know," Billy wasn't that much of an asshole. If Steve didn't want him to cum down his throat, he wouldn't, but fuck he really wanted to. He held Steve's jaw as he slid his hips back and then forward a little, not nearly enough to choke Steve, but enough to have control over him.

It was strange how he both wanted Billy to shut the fuck up and somehow still talk to him. When Billy spoke to him, his voice low and his words dirty, it just burned Steve from the inside out. He stroked himself a little faster as he gave a small, almost imperceptible

nod and felt Billy's fingers press a little harder on his jaw. Steve's entire face burned as he did so, but it hadn't been that bad the last time. He enjoyed watching Billy lose himself in the moment, lose to Steve. Of course the last time he hadn't been touching himself and he whimpered softly on Billy's cock.

Billy sucked in a tight breath between his teeth when Steve nodded. He swore under his breath and rolled his hips forward again, watching how those pink lips accommodated him, sucked in him in, and Billy felt lost. The stress of the day coiled tight into his gut and then burst outward. It coiled into his nerves, his being, and exploded, reaching far, far into his fingers and toes. He grunted, Steve's name fumbling out of his lips (maybe several times, slurred), as he came down the other teen's throat. He held him still as he did, his chest rising and falling sharply. His mind blanked out, and Steve had done exactly what Billy had asked: he fucking *forgot* .

Steve winced once as Billy's fingers tightened in his hair, but it barely hurt. He was still stroking himself quickly as the first ropes of cum hit the back of his throat and he swallowed thickly around them. Steve knew he was breathing hard, but all he could hear was Billy saying his name, over and over again, as he whined loudly on Billy's sensitive cock. Steve came hard then, a few tears leaking from his eyes from the intensity as he opened his mouth wider, releasing Billy's cock as he groaned. His back bowed as he gasped, a little bit of drool leaving his mouth and falling onto the plush carpet as grabbed onto Billy's ass with one hand, squeezing to steady himself from falling forward. The sound of Steve's ragged breathing filled the room.

Billy, when he opened his eyes, could have come again. He fucking could have because of the way Steve was arching, how he was holding onto him, and how fucking wrecked he looked. He licked his lower lip and pushed Steve's hair back so he could get a better look at his face. Instead of staying where he was, Billy slowly kneeled

down so that he could kiss the corner of Steve's mouth. He reached down, took Steve's hand, the one that had caught Steve's cum, and brought it up to his lips. He licked along Steve's forefinger, making sure he had his eyes as he took Steve's cum into his mouth, and sucked. He bit down gently before pulling back, just enough to press another sloppy kiss to Steve's lips.

Steve barely kissed Billy when he bent over, he was trying to catch his breath as Billy knelt down beside him and grabbed his wrist. Steve's eyes were wide as he watched Billy slowly begin to kiss and lick at his hand. His eyes burned into Steve's and his heart was hammering in his chest as Steve mumbled, "Holy shit..." Steve felt goosebumps all over his skin as he stared at Billy, transfixed. When Billy leaned over to kiss him, Steve was still for a moment, slightly in disbelief, before he quickly wrapped his arms around Billy's neck and pulled Billy down *hard* on top of him between his legs.

Steve landed on his back with a loud *whump* as he kissed Billy hard and deeply, sucked hard on his tongue as his hand slid down Billy's strong back. Steve did his best to be mindful of the bruises and instead arched his pelvis, met his own with Billy's as he groaned and kissed over Billy's face. Steve shook a little under Billy as the blonde responded. Steve tried to force himself to calm down, not take things too far, definitely not so far so that Max would have to hear them. Even if he started this, Steve had to stop it. "Sorry, sorry, we have to--we have to stop--I shouldn't have done that."

Billy was shocked when Steve suddenly grabbed him and pulled him down. He really shouldn't have been surprised, at all, because Steve kept doing that. He leaned down and returned the kiss just as desperately, filling Steve's mouth and claiming him for himself. He slid a hand beneath his waist and yanked him up, just as lost in whatever it is they were doing before Steve broke off and started babbling. He growled, though, and still hiked Steve's hips up, pushing his own despite the fact that they were both soft from having

just cum.

“You really wanna stop?” Billy managed, one of his hands tangled deeply into Steve’s hair. He tugged him so they could look each other in the eye and grinned “You wanna stop, princess? Just tell me, and I will.” But it was obvious that Billy *didn’t* want to stop, even if his body was spent for the moment.

Steve was breathing hard as he looked at Billy. Shit, he would stop and Steve really, really didn’t fucking want to, but...even though Steve would never admit it, he *knew* he wouldn’t be able to keep quiet. There was no way he was going to do that when Max had already been waiting for them, for both of them, and Steve sighed heavily. His head fell back on the carpet and when he looked at Billy, he was sure the blonde already knew his answer. ‘Fuck.’ Steve gave a little disappointed nod, but before Billy rose, he grabbed onto his wrist for a moment. “I just....I just want you to know that I would, like...with you. If we were alone tonight and you weren’t hurt....I would.”

Billy had paused when he was getting up and looked down at Steve. To say he was disappointed was an understatement, but he knew that Steve was right. Max well there. Hell, Billy was injured (he could totally fucking ignore his injuries to fuck Steve, though). But he also knew he was going to keep this over Steve’s head and tease him, mercilessly, until he was begging to be fucked. He grinned at Steve, but had no intention of letting him know why.

“Lemme tell you something, Harrington,” Billy leaned down and brushed his lips over Steve’s ear, “When I finally fuck you, you won’t be able to remember your own name. You’ll be squirming and crying and *begging* for me. And when I finally let you cum, it’ll be so much that you’ll blackout.” Billy stood slowly and chuckled.

Steve's eyes widened as his face heated up and that burning spread slowly down his neck all the way to his chest. He watched Billy for several moments as the blonde composed himself, as if they hadn't just nearly fucked on the floor and then Billy had whispered those filthy things in his ear. "Jesus Christ..." Steve stood up slowly. His pants were essentially dry but he just quickly changed into his own pair of sweats and a loose, light blue t-shirt. He still felt a little shook up as he cleared his throat. "Just keep it in your pants for now, Hargrove." And Steve kicked himself a little for the tiny waver in his voice, as he watched Billy grin at him.

"Pretty sure it was you eggin' me on, princess," Billy laughed and pushed his own wet sweatpants off. He slid them off to the side and tilted his head. "Mind grabbin' me my bag? I need to get more clothes. Unless you have a pair of sweats that'll fit me." He doubted it, but sweats usually had good give and if they were a little tight, oh well. Billy was used to wearing tight clothes. He would just have to refrain from jumping Steve while in the presence of Max. He snickered at that and ran his fingers through his hair. The movement made his chest hurt, but he didn't mind. Being with Steve made the bruises... not ache so much. But he'd never tell him that.

Steve stood there for a moment, silently looked at Billy who was stark naked in his room, before Steve wordlessly marched out of his room. Steve's feet padded down the hall and not down the stairs. About three minutes later, Steve came back in the room and handed Billy the ugliest pair of bright yellow sweats and a green tank top. "They're my Dad's," Steve deadpanned, "And you will wear them." Steve was sure Billy could wear a pair of his own sweats, but they might be too confining for Billy's bruises and Steve's libido. This was a win-win situation.

Billy blinked as Steve left and then tried not to laugh when he

returned. He failed, laughing so hard that he was wheezing. That *asshole* . “Man, *fuck you* , Harrington.” Billy managed between gasped breaths. He reached out and yanked the clothing away from him. “I’m gonna rock these, and when you fuckin’ can’t handle not fucking me, you’ll realize I’m in your *pop’s clothes* .” Billy pointed at him and then settled onto the bed. He pulled the sweatpants up and over his hips, and then slowly pulled the tank top on (fuck his chest bruising). Once they were on, Billy grinned wolfishly at Steve. “Just you wait, Harrington. I’m gonna ruin you.”

“Promises, promises, King Billy, I’m pretty sure you in those clothes and any look of disappointment on your face will be enough to stop me from doing anything stupid. Now hurry your ass up, I’m starving.” Steve lingered for just a moment before he headed down the stairs slowly, not exactly helping Billy come down but making sure he was in earshot in case it was requested. Ruin him? He was pretty sure Billy Hargrove had already ruined him.

Max shot him a hot glare as Steve came into the living room. He grabbed a slice of pizza and his drink before he flopped back on the couch. Steve took a large bite and looked at her, made sure he gave nothing away when he told her with his mouth full, “I told you to get pepperoni.”

Billy rolled his eyes and chuckled. He followed Steve down the stairs and tried to refrain from wincing. The movements were hard, but he didn’t give a fuck. He was having a better time watching Steve walk down the stairs. He had an *ass* . He was chuckling again at the bottom of the steps. Honestly, this wasn’t going to be as bad as he thought. As he walked passed Max, he didn’t take a slice of the pizza. No, he snagged the slice in her hand and sat down in one of the large lounge chairs. He took a large bite from it and grinned at her, as if daring her to say anything (although, really, he was just playing).

“Hey!” Max exclaimed when Billy grabbed her slice and gave him a little glare. Steve grabbed his water from the table and drank quickly with a small glance Billy’s way. Max’s eyes narrowed, the room quiet other than the loud yells of the A-Team on the television. “If you two are done *making out* , then you need to put something else on, because I can’t figure out how to work Steve’s V.C.R.!” She cried out and Steve promptly choked on his water. Max looked over at Billy, “He has like 30 tapes and I am *not* watching the Ghostbusters again!” Despite what she said, she leveled her gaze on Billy, and she was clearly saying more than what actually came out of her mouth.

Billy choked on his slice of pizza as Max demanded another movie and then laughed. He held the slice away from himself, but his laughter was loud and amused. Finally, after his laughter died down and his body stopped fucking aching from it, he tilted his head to Steve. “Hear that, Steve? Max wants another movie. Y’might wanna get on that.” He didn’t say anything about Max’s comment on them making out. Oh, Max was fucking brilliant. He knew that. Nothing really got past her (except for his father). His eyes glittered as he watched Steve, waiting for him to say something, to deny it. He was curious what the guy would do, especially given that, well, he was not just making out with a guy--it was with Billy Hargrove.

Steve blushed bright red and cleared his throat, that water went down the wrong pipe and he shook his head a little. The Hargroves were going to be the fucking death of him and all he wanted was goddamn pepperoni pizza. Steve wordlessly got up from his spot on the couch and ejected Ghostbusters before he put in another movie, one of the Monty Python films that Dustin had left over at his house. He glanced at both Billy and Max who were watching him before he grabbed another slice of pizza and shook his head, it was enough that she thought they were together, but to also know they had been doing *something* killed him. Steve was just embarrassed, but he wasn’t going to insult her intelligence. He glanced over at Max and then at Billy, “...It’s not a terrible combination.”

Billy could see how uncomfortable Steve was, and it sort of amused him. He also felt bad, somewhere in the pit of his oil slick of a heart, so he stood, abandoning his seat. He walked over to Steve and sat down next to him so that their shoulders brushed. He took another bite of the piece he had stolen from Max and tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. He was quiet, which was uncharacteristic for Billy, but fuck, he was finally relaxing after what had happened.

Billy slung an arm on the back of the couch so that his free hand rested behind Max. He shuffled her hair playfully before pulling his arm back and resting it in his lap. He still didn't look at her or Steve, keeping his eyes on the ceiling.

Both Steve and Max looked shocked when Billy sat between them, and Max didn't even object when Billy played with her hair. Max watched Billy for several long moments, she knew they had a strained relationship, but she had done a lot of thinking that day. She felt horribly guilty for dismissing the few things she had seen Neil do, for not coming to Billy sooner. Max often thought before that Billy was just a giant asshole, but she remembered when she first met Billy when they lived in California. Billy had been so much happier then, took her places because he felt like it and not because Neil told him. Billy took her to the beach and after they had ice cream and fries, always. Billy rented her first pair of skates and smoked a cigarette while he watched her wobble down the boardwalk. And when she had seen skateboarders that day, doing tricks on railings and landings, Max pouted and said *that's* what she wanted. Billy just shrugged at her and the following week, set down a skateboard on her bed when she was doing her homework. "Here" was all he said.

Max scooted closer to Billy slowly before she rested beside him, her head pressed gently against his arm. She never wanted anything like that to happen to Billy, no matter what he did to her. He was her brother and he always would be.

Steve watched the pair with interest and kept clear of them both, allowed them to have their moment. He felt this warmth spring up inside him when Max sat closer to Billy and he smiled and turned his head back to the t.v.

Billy had to convince himself not to tense as Max moved closer. He was still trying to drill it into his head that not all kindness, not all gentle touches, were tricks. They weren't all angles to get into him and rip him apart. He held his breath for a moment and then let it out, shakily, and relaxed with Max lying against him. He wanted to run his fingers through her hair, to ruffle it again, but he settled with his arm over the couch, almost on her shoulders but not quite (like how he felt--torn between pushing her away and holding her). He glanced down at her for a moment, taking in her expression, before looking back to the television.

Squishing his panic was hard, but Billy managed. He moved his other hand, which was now free of pizza, to Steve's thigh and squeezed it. He didn't look at Steve, didn't want to. He didn't want to show Steve this vulnerability, even though it was right. Fucking. There. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back. He wasn't interested in the movie, but if he fell asleep, with these two on each side of him, he would be okay with that.

Steve smiled wider and even though it made his stomach flip, he set his hand on top of Billy's. He knew Max wasn't going to say anything, even if they were both being like this. Steve turned back to the movie, chuckling a little as he heard Max giggle, which made Steve laugh a little louder in return. Steve knew it was going to be strange, living with them for the next few weeks until his parents got back.

His mother would understand that Steve offered them a place to stay, and just be a little upset that people had seen the home when Steve

never cleaned it to her standards. But his father...would not approve of Billy. He was very tight lipped about his beliefs, and Steve wasn't even sure his father would care he dated a guy—no, it was what people would *say* that bothered his father. But with how warm Billy's hand was under his, Steve just couldn't bring himself to really care.

They stayed like that for a good portion of the movie until Steve quietly got up. Both Billy and Max were dozing on the couch. Max was leaning more against Billy at that point. Steve padded out of the living room and got Billy's medication. He grabbed a glass of water and wordlessly pressed the pills into Billy's hand as he sat down, held the glass expectantly.

Billy had somehow moved between sleep and consciousness. He watched Max sometimes, during the movies, and sometimes he looked at Steve. By the time the movie was almost done, though, Billy was exhausted and actually felt like sleeping. The throbbing in his body was suddenly bothering him, and it was as if Steve *knew* , because he was suddenly in front of him and had water and pain medication.

"Hey, princess," Billy murmured, half-asleep and affectionate. He had, at some point, tucked an arm over Max's shoulders and rest his hand on her arm. It was strange, being his okay with touch, but he guessed it wouldn't hurt (especially if Max was asleep). "Thanks..." He put the pills in his mouth and took the offered glass of water. He swallowed the pills down.

"Where do you want to bring Max?" Billy hurt, but carrying her was easy. He shifted and slid his arms beneath her body. Slowly, as to not wake her he gathered Max against his chest and picked her up off the couch. His injuries throbbed, but Max came first (he wasn't sure when that happened).

Steve rolled his eyes as he looked over at Billy. Billy pushed himself too much, far too much. He murmured, "I may not bench as much as you, but I can handle a little girl. Turn off the t.v. and c'mon." Steve carefully took Max from Billy and made his way to the stairs. The guest bedroom would do for her and Steve supposed...Billy could stay in his room, if he was comfortable with that. Steve climbed up the stairs slowly to not jostle Max. She was knocked out and Steve wasn't surprised after the day both she and Billy had.

Steve laid Max down in the bed and took off her shoes. He hadn't told her to change into her pajamas, but it wasn't like it was going to hurt her. Steve pulled the blanket over her prone form, tucked her in and moved away when he felt Billy's presence behind him. Steve went around the room, turned on a small light for her and he kept the hall lights on as well.

Billy was reluctant, but when Steve had Max in his arms, Steve felt like his whole world was in one place. He watched quietly as Steve set her down and tucked her in, how careful he was with her, and suddenly he regretted calling Steve those fucking names. Steve had taken care of those kids, and he certainly still did, and Billy had assumed the worst (because, hello, he was Billy fucking Hargrove). He looked away when Steve finally stepped out of the room.

"Ready to crash, Harrington?" Billy murmured, and he meant it. He had bone-deep exhaustion, and he wouldn't be surprised if he didn't wake up until well past noon the next day. He knew he had to deal with the cop, and he had to talk about shit to get the restraining order, but for tonight... he'd just sleep.

Steve ran a hand through his hair and nodded. "Yeah. but...do

you...want to sleep in my bed? I'm not gonna get offended either way, and I can take the couch, I mean I really think it's comfortable, so..." Steve felt like he was constantly pushing Billy and being pushed by Billy into uncomfortable territory for the both of them. And really fast. He recalled going from his antics at the pool to sucking Billy off, and in retrospect, it seemed insane. But there was just something there, both of them caught up in each other and revealing shit that was bottled up after so long. Steve really wouldn't resent Billy for wanting some space. Steve knew he should probably have some space himself, to evaluate everything, but at its core--he just wanted Billy. And that was a terrifying truth but after this fucked up day, it was still a truth. Billy was capable of more of so much more and all Steve wanted to do was be a part of it.

Billy was struggling with himself. He wanted to sleep next to Steve, yes, but he also hurt. He wasn't sure if he was going to sleep well, and he knew that he could keep Harrington up with that shit. Hell, Neil could have killed him. It felt like he had *wanted* to kill him, and that had hurt more than anything else. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked around the hallway.

"I wouldn't mind sleeping with you," Billy looked back to Steve finally, "But just sleeping, Harrington. I feel like shit and I'm pretty sure it looks like I got run over by a damned truck." He reached out and took Steve's wrist. It wasn't his hand, but it was close, and he tugged him down the hall and toward his room.

Steve couldn't help the stupid grin that spread over his face, "Don't worry Hargrove, I won't take advantage of your purity." Steve allowed himself to be tugged into his room as he removed his shirt. He kept his sweats on as he automatically walked around to his side of the bed. He plugged in the white lights automatically as he went, just operated on autopilot as he climbed into the bed.

He could wake up and make them both breakfast in the morning. Not something too fancy, because he would feel like an idiot, but just something nice--like eggs, bacon, and toast. Both Billy and Max had just dealt with so much that he wanted them both to try to relax, have something nice before reality crashed back in on them.

Billy rolled his eyes, "Pretty sure you destroyed whatever purity I had left, Steve." His lips were quirked in a grin, though, his eyes reflecting something close to affection. He followed Steve's lead, though, and eased the tanktop up and over his head. When Steve plugged the lights in, he couldn't help the small smile on his face. Perhaps he could drive away the nightmares tonight for Steve, even if they haunted him.

Once Billy slid into the bed, he settled onto his side. He didn't cling to Steve. He didn't pull him in. He wasn't the type to initiate contact, so he waited for the go-ahead, the move that Steve could make if he *did* want Billy to touch him.

Steve rolled over to face Billy and swallowed softly as he took him in. Even with bruises all over him, Billy was so beautiful. Steve had never been with a guy, never had more than a stray thought here and there, but Billy was just Billy. None of that shit mattered to Steve when he looked at Billy. He knew he was staring, knew Billy was watching him stare, when he scooted close to Billy. The previous night he slept pressed against the blonde, and he had felt safe for the first time in a long time. Tonight Steve gingerly wrapped his arms around Billy and pulled Billy on top of him. Billy's weight was all heavy muscle and probably normally feel crushing, but tonight Steve felt light and he found Billy's weight reassuring and grounded.

Billy blew out a gentle breath, as if he had been tense while waiting, as Steve pulled him basically on top of him. He anchored an arm

around Steve's waist and pressed his cheek against Steve's neck. He held him close, avoiding his gaze now because he was *bad* at the whole emotional shit. His body began to feel sluggish, strange, and he realized that the medications running through his system were probably at fault for that. He hummed and blinked. Yes, they were working, and he was okay with that. Still, how strong was this shit?

Then again, Billy didn't take medications for pain. This would be the first time, so he wasn't surprised when he felt a little buzzed.

"I've got you, princess," Billy murmured and pressed a kiss into Steve's hair.

"You do, huh?" Steve smiled and gently rubbed Billy's back. Steve could hear his words slur and knew that Billy had started to really feel the medication, which was good. Maybe Billy would be able to get through a pain-free night. "Maybe we should always have some drugs on hand when we need to bring you down," Steve said, slightly amused as he smelled Billy's hair. It kind of smelled like that fruity conditioner his mother had, and it just made Steve smile a little wider.

Steve was sure Hopper would be over tomorrow and the kids would have questions. It had been Dustin who called him. Was he going to be able to explain all of this to Dustin? Max took it in stride, but the boys could be very different.

"No--only when needed," Billy blinked again and then let himself sink deeper into the mattress. He hadn't even realized how tense he was, how rigid he kept his body until the pills started to force him to relax, to just *be* instead of vibrate with all of the emotions he kept swirling in his brain. He tightened his hold on Steve and sighed. With

the pain slowly ebbing, his vision began to dim and he *knew* he would be out within minutes. He pressed his cheek closer to Steve's skin and breathed in him. Maybe he wouldn't have nightmares. Maybe he'd go through a night, with Steve, and leave them at the door.

Billy could hope (even if that was a dangerous thing to do). He pressed a small kiss to the skin in front of him. It was obvious that he wasn't particularly paying attention anymore as his breathing started to even out.

Steve continued rubbing Billy's back and felt him ease into sleep on top of him. Billy seemed so much younger when he was relaxed, when he was happy, and, Steve thought, didn't have to worry about his father. Steve wasn't sure what Neil had done to Billy and how long he had done it, but when Steve saw Neil and Billy's form on the ground...if Billy needed his help to stay away from Neil, Steve would do whatever he could to make that happen.

When Steve was sure that Billy was asleep, he looked at the lights behind his desk. To a casual observer, they probably just looked cute, some stupid teenager thing. The truth was that he first strung them up for Nancy, but he found that he plugged them in even when she wasn't over. When the night terrors got bad, he could focus on them, tell himself it was just a dream and that thing was gone. And then Dustin had a lizard that ate his cat.

Steve thought about Max down the hall, did she sleep with a light on? Did she think about what happened? If she was anything like Billy, she would just suppress it. Maybe a few years from now, Steve would be able to tell Billy what happened, tell him about *what* took Barbara. And Billy would listen and think he was crazy, right. Steve sighed and rested back on the bed.

Years with Billy...the blonde pressed his nose against the column of Steve's neck and Steve thought: maybe he could live with that.

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

Once again, Hopper saves the day as the boys struggle to keep it together. More fluff, angst, and smut is on the way, in that order.

The following morning, Billy did exactly what he thought he would. When he finally woke up, groggy and uncomfortable, the clock blinked eleven at him. He groaned and rubbed his eyes. He was sure Steve was already up, and of course, the guy hadn't woken him up. Steve wouldn't. He sat up slowly, carefully, because his muscles hurt. Shit. The hospital hadn't been joking when they said it'd hurt. He could even feel his heartbeat in the stitches that were in his ear. He squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. Fuck.

After composing himself, Billy stood from the bed and then glanced out the window, to the pool. It was sort of shitty, now that he thought about it, that Steve's window looked over the pool. Steve obviously had issues with the thing, and here his bedroom was, overlooking it. He snorted and shook his head. Whatever. He rubbed his eyes again, contemplated taking the medicine, and then tossed the idea. He'd rather feel pain than nothing at all.

As Billy left the room, his mind began to crawl toward the idea of the cop. He had to file shit today. He had to talk to the cop and figure out their next move. If Susan refused to leave Neil, Max would be in danger. Would Max be forced to go into foster care? Billy was the one injured, but he wasn't sure, exactly, how that worked. Was Neil then considered a danger for her, too? He walked down the stairs, lost in his thoughts.

Max and Steve were talking, but as soon as Steve heard Billy over his

head and then coming down the stairs, Steve shouted, "Hurry up Hargrove, your breakfast is going to get cold!" Steve was actually kind of proud of himself. Steve's time to himself was generally pretty subdued; he didn't throw parties anymore and just generally kept to the few portions of the house he actually had a reason for being in at the moment. The house felt empty most of the time, but with Max was sitting at the table, munching on strawberries, Steve felt pretty good. After Max ate her eggs, she spread a ton of jam on a few slices of toast and then didn't eat any of it. Her hair was still damp and she was in different clothes from when they put her to bed the night before.

She eyed Billy carefully as he came into the kitchen and gave him a little grin, "We let you sleep in."

As Billy walked into the kitchen, he rolled his eyes at Steve. "Cold food, hot food, not really a difference, Harrington." He smirked, though, and glanced down at Max. "Yeah. I noticed. Thanks, kid." He walked passed her and let himself squeeze her shoulder for a second before he slumped into one of the vacant chairs. As he did, he flinched and held his breath. Okay, perhaps he'd take half a pill. Not a full one because he *didn't like* not being in control, but maybe enough to take the edge off.

"Y'know, I heard about you being a mom, Steve, but this... this sort of solidifies it," Billy chuckled and tipped his head back to look at Steve.

Steve walked over with a plate of hot food for Billy and gave him a dirty look at the comment. It wasn't exactly the first time he heard that, the little shits had their jokes too. Steve dropped the plate on the table, rather than set it down before Billy. A piece of toast and some eggs fell from the plate. "Bon appetit, asshole," Steve

deadpanned.

Steve fixed his own plate and sat down beside Billy. He had been trying to think of how they were going to approach the day. Max had already given a statement. Maybe Steve should take her to the arcade or something like that, but then he risked leaving Billy alone if Hopper came over. That could be really fucking bad. Steve ate some bason and shoved a piece of toast in his mouth. He chewed slowly on it, crumbs getting everywhere, when he grabbed Billy's medication and poured him some orange juice. Steve set the pills beside Billy and gave him a look.

Billy raised an eyebrow as Steve dropped the plate onto the table. He hadn't meant to actually offend him, so the pit of his stomach sort of coiled. Anxiety made his nerves curl. Shit. He glanced down at the plate and licked his lips. He didn't want to apologize, not in front of Max, but he also didn't touch the plate of food. His mind was sort of swirling, trying to find a way to apologize without apologizing, a way he could physically show that he hadn't meant what he said--that he had been playing (something that he had done to try to forget what he needed to do that day).

It was then that Billy remembered that his cigarettes had been ruined in the pool, and he wanted to punch something. If anything, he could have stepped out, smoked, and calmed down. Now he was a jittery mess of nerves. He looked down at the pills and the orange juice, felt that anxiety turn to anger, and shot Steve a furious look.

"Fuck no. I'm not taking those again," Billy got up and walked toward the living room, despite not having any cigarettes. He shoved the sliding door open and then closed it. Maybe they were salvageable? He doubted it, but he could hope (never hope). He made his way over to his lighter and pack, picked them up, and let out a

rough sigh Shit. Not salvageable. The fuck was he thinking, anyway? He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at the sky.

Steve sighed, not this again. Steve grabbed the pills and the juice before he rose, opened the door and walked out to where Billy was. It was already really bright out, despite the coolness in the air. Steve wasn't worried about Billy being hurt in broad daylight, he didn't think it would do that. Steve was still holding onto the pills and the drink when he sat down on a lounge chair. He leaned back a little and kept his gaze on Billy.

"I can get some more in town later today." Steve rested his arm and propped up his chin. "Why aren't we taking our pills now? Because Hopper will kick my ass."

Billy looked up as Steve walked out and narrowed his eyes on him. He clenched the ruined cigarettes in his hand and glanced at the pool. It was stupid how calm Steve was now compared to at night. It was as if the shit he went through only ever happened under the blanket of darkness. He flicked his thumb over the lighter. It didn't light, no matter how many times he flicked at it. He avoided Steve's eyes for a while before finally looking at him.

"Because, Harrington, I can handle pain. I've dealt with this shit before. I didn't need pain medication before. I don't need it now. It just fucks with my head." Billy shrugged and looked out at the pool again. "And I'd rather be fuckin' level headed today, thank you very fuckin' much." He glanced at the door, as if expecting to see Max, but he was relieved when she didn't follow Steve outside.

Steve watched him carefully, trying not to start another argument. Billy was being sensitive again, fine. He was back to Harrington in

that tone, fine. Part of him thought he would take pick up the shits and take Max to the arcade, leave Billy alone for the day. But that was him being pissed off too, irritated by Billy's tough guy act when it was just them. Steve rose slowly and set down the juice and pills there. "The other one is just for infections that could happen, and it's not going to fuck with your head. Come back in and eat breakfast when you're ready." And with that Steve strode back into the house.

Max gave him a little worried look, but Steve just smiled and sat down at the table. He has seen his mother do it plenty of times and felt that it was a look he had mastered at this point. He ate only a little more, his appetite gone as he looked at the spread on the table. Jesus, he was being so stupid. Steve knew he just had to keep his wits about him, not take shit personal, especially not right now. Steve forced himself to eat a little more before he told Max he was going to take a shower. He felt strange announcing it, never had to be beholden to anybody or account for his time in his own house before with his parents gone.

Steve took the stairs quickly and angrily stripped out of his pajamas. He was pissed at Billy, sure, but it was because he was concerned. For somebody who came across as incredibly selfish, Billy had a hard time looking after his own interests. Steve turned the water on incredibly hot and stepped inside. Just something to clear his head and he would deal with this again.

Billy clenched his fists as Steve walked passed him and he kept his gaze on the pool. Heat pooled into his body, and not the particular kind he liked. It was anger, and his chest ached with it. He grit his teeth and tried his best to calm down, to think of something that he could do to prevent whatever was going on in his head, but he decided against it. Anger was better than pain, after all. He turned and walked inside. He passed Max, not saying anything, and climbed down the stairs to the basement.

Once Billy found his bag, he shucked the sweats and tugged on a pair of jeans and a loose shirt (and shoved his wallet into his back pocket). He tugged on some socks and then headed back up the stairs. His shoes came on last. He needed air. He needed out because he was *simmering* , and he knew that there was a fight waiting in him, and he couldn't take that out on Steve.

Instead, he stopped by Max, trying to control what little he could, "I'm walking down the street. Corner store." He said, his voice hoarse and thick. He didn't look at her as he left, his boots crunching the gravel below his feet as he ignored the voice in his head to tell him to stay the fuck put.

He couldn't. He needed his cigarettes and he needed to *get the fuck away* .

A fight was imminent otherwise. Steve was just trying to help, but it was just too much at the moment. It was impossible to avoid if Billy didn't run away. Max didn't even call out after him, so used to seeing Billy in this state but never able to make the puzzle pieces fit before. Hopper was going to be there today, to discuss his fucked up life and poor little fucked up Billy Hargrove.

It's not like anybody was going to step in, not for him anyway. Max was younger, if she wanted it, there might be hope for her. But he was nearly a legal adult himself, Billy would be expected to ride out the storm until he could get to shelter. All of this was a waste of time and resources and effort—especially on Steve's part.

Billy was halfway to the store when Hopper's truck came down the

road. Hopper turned his vehicle around when he saw Billy stalking down the road, pulled behind him and inched the car forward slowly, just following Billy.

Billy had saw Hopper's car. He had heard it turn around, and he could feel him following him. It didn't help the itch under his skin, the need to lash out, the need to fight. Instead, it made him feel like he needed to punch something. He gets beaten by his dad *once* , and it's found out *once* and now everyone was crawling into his skin. He hissed to himself and ignored Hopper for now, continuing down the road until he saw the side of the corner store.

Before he walked in, he resisted the urge to flick off the cop. He didn't, congrats on himself, and purchased a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. When he came back out, and saw the car sitting there, he sighed raggedly. His shoulders slumped and he ran his fingers through his hair. Shit. This was happening.

When Billy walked up to the driver's side window, he scowled. "You plannin' on following me all over the place now, cop?"

"Technically since I was coming to speak to you, I'm just doing my job. Harrington couldn't get you cigarettes? At least he's 18." Hopper leaned back in his seat, reached into his own pocket and lit up a cigarette. He inhaled deeply, looked Billy over and jerked his head towards the passenger side. "Get in kid." It wasn't a request, even though it wasn't said unkindly.

Hopper watched Billy carefully, he had seen plenty of Billys in his lifetime, was one in his lifetime. And he could see him fucking up, like it was the most natural thing the kid could do. Things had been so different when he was Billy's age, but those emotions, that rage,

that was always the same.

Billy pursed his lips. He rounded the front of the SUV and yanked the door open. When he got inside, he closed the door, slouched against the seat, and looked out the window. "So. What do you need to know, exactly? What... details?" Because he wasn't going to fucking panic, that's why. He wasn't going to let this destroy him. He closed his eyes tightly and began to unwrap the pack of cigarettes he bought. He shook them first and then pulled one out. His hands were shaking, though, and he avoided Hopper's gaze as he lit the end of his cigarette and breathed in.

Hopper shrugged a little, his cigarette balancing on his lower lip, "I don't know, what do you want or tell me?" Hopper put the SUV in reverse and pulled out of the lot, he began to drive slowly, but they weren't far from Steve's place and quickly passed it.

Hopper looked over at Billy, "Pretty often right? Maybe not every week but when it happens—" Hopper chuckled a little, "Well, enough to make you hate the sonuvabitch, right? Enough to not want me to take you home the last time I came across your drunk ass at some shitty high school party. At least that much."

Billy opened his mouth to respond, but at the mention of their last run-in, he closed it and looked away. That had terrified him. The last thing he wanted Hopper to do was take him home, where his dad would have laid into him. He blanched at the thought and pulled the cigarette from his lips. It trembled in his hold and he sucked a little breath in between his teeth.

"Often, yeah. The bad ones? Like this... maybe once a month. Little run-ins. Like slapping or shoving. That was more--it was more

frequent. Maybe four times a week. I just kept breaking the rules, you know. Respect and responsibility.” Billy glanced up at Steve’s house as they passed, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he looked out the side window and chewed on his lower lip. “It’s been since I was... little? I don’t remember. Maybe after my mom died. That’s when it got bad. The worst was--was when he found me--” Billy fumbled with the words, but he tried. “--I was kissin’ a guy in my car--” he flinched, as if expecting Hopper to hit him, “and he beat me so badly that I lost teeth. I--I couldn’t hear right for months.”

Tears were gathering in his eyes, but he ignored them, taking another desperate drag of his cigarette.

Hopper gritted his teeth as he listened to Billy, knew he needed to, but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow. “Yeah, well, that would do it, right?” Hopper turned the SUV under a small overpass. “Catch a lot of speeders here, sometimes I let them go. Sometimes they just need to see me and they stop speeding.” Hopper groaned as he bent down in the seat, grabbed a little bag with donuts in it and shoved it in Billy’s direction. Once again, it didn’t appear to be a request.

“That’s what’s you got going on with Harrington, right? I mean no offense, but you beat the shit out of him, what? A little over a week ago, I guess now.” Hopper put out his cigarette before just lighting up another. It wasn’t his business, not really, but he thought it was fairly obvious from yesterday.

Billy took the box of doughnuts in surprise and looked at him. What was it with people shoving food at him? He set them on the seat and glanced out the window. He fidgeted with his jeans and then shrugged. “It’s complicated, I guess... But yeah? You aren’t... please don’t tell anyone. I don’t care if my reputation is trashed. Steve doesn’t deserve it, though.” The last statement was quiet as he fiddled

with his cigarette. "I don't want to... drag him down with me. I've done that shit enough and now he's stuck with me at his house."

"But, dad believes in respect and responsibility," Billy began again, pushing that issue. "I just. I fucking sucked at it, I guess. I would say shit, or not say anything at all, and it wasn't enough. Or it was too much. Fuck. I don't know. He kept telling me that I did it on purpose. I guess, maybe I did? I don't know." At this point, Billy hadn't even realized how badly Neil had managed to brainwash him into thinking certain things, feeling certain ways--like fucking *helpless* or like a piece of shit. "If I just... wasn't like this, it wouldn't have happened."

Hopper snorted. "Kid, who the hell am I going to tell that you and Harrington have a thing going? I'm not going to go around Hawkins high." He sighed and took a deep drag from his cigarette again. Children were difficult and confusing, teenagers even more so. He was going to have to deal with his own soon.

"Look....one of the most vivid memories I have of my old man was when he broke my arm when I was 5. He came home, smelling like alcohol to my mother and probably some other woman, and he just cracked her right in front of me. I made this mistake of getting in between them. My father grabbed my arm and just tossed me across the room like I weighed nothing. I hadn't done anything wrong. And even when I got older, even when I was a shitty kid, I didn't deserve any of that. There isn't anything you can say or do to make him happy--face it, you'll always piss him off. Way he is and the best thing you can do is get away and make sure that isn't you." Hopper took another long drag before he stamped his cigarette out, he fixed his gaze upon Billy.

"Harrington used to be a little shit like you. If you got something, think you *really* got something, you hold on tight and you don't let

go. He can take a lot more than you think.” Hopper pressed his lips in a thin line as he thought of Joyce, how many times he passed her in the hallway, watched her laugh at something one of her stupid friends said. Even when he saw her around town, soon pregnant with one and then two kids, she always looked so beautiful to him.

Billy closed his lips and pressed them tightly together. He stared out the window and ignored the fact that his eyes stung, that he could feel one of the tears tracing down his face. He had always had this weird thought in the back of his head that, one day, he could prove Neil wrong, that he could show him that he *was* a decent person and that he *was* going to be successful in life. It seemed that was a joke (was he really that surprised? No.).

“I’m not good for him,” Billy offered finally, his voice hoarse. “You tell me to hold onto him and I keep fucking it up. That’s all I do. I fuck shit up.” It was true. Everything he touched was eventually destroyed. He held onto the butt of his cigarette. He hadn’t taken a drag in a while, too preoccupied with his thoughts. “He doesn’t deserve that.” That being *him* .

“Listen kid, I’m not gonna pretend like I have all the answers, but when we fuck things up, we try to take down the other person with us. It’s not just us, it’s never just *us* . What I have right now with *my* kid—” Hopper took a deep breath and leaned back in his seat. Hopper felt this instinctive need to clench his fists as he stared at the road. A car passed them by, not speeding, but driving far too fast until it passed his vehicle after a panicked glance in Hopper’s direction.

Hopper started slowly, “It’s the best thing I’ve had in a long goddamn time, a real long time. But running away? It’s gonna fucking burn you up until you can’t feel anything inside anymore, anything but them.

Harrington isn't stuck with you, he wouldn't have you there if he didn't want you there."

Hopper felt a burning in his chest, wanted nothing more than to see El. Watch her eat some Eggos and find a new book for her to read, her head of glossy brown curls lifting every now and then to ask him what a word meant. He started the car with another sigh, grabbed his fresh pack of cigarettes and shoved it in Billy's general direction. "Whatever he sees in you, run towards *that* if you wanna make it kid. That's how you're going to survive this world." Hopper put the car in drive and slowly pulled out from the road, heading back in the direction of Steve's place.

Billy had gone quiet, which wasn't characteristic of him. He was obviously thinking about Hopper's words, letting them sink in. He was thinking about Steve. How he looked at Billy--that stupid smile--or that concerned frown. He looked at Billy like he wasn't a piece of shit, and Billy simply wasn't used to that. He was used to being the shit on the bottom of someone's boot, and being anything more than that meant that there were expectations, and Billy never lived up to those.

Billy never lived up to anyone's expectations. His dad had made sure to drill that into him.

Once Billy looked out of the window, he realized he was trembling. His breath was fogging up the glass, and his eyes were watering. At the moment, he wanted to go take those fucking pills because Steve told him to. He wanted to curl around Steve and apologize. He wanted to lay himself open and maybe, just maybe, Steve would forgive him. But he also knew that, once he saw Steve, he'd close off and run.

Billy was so tired of running.

When Hopper pulled up into Steve's driveway, they both saw Steve race out of the house with Max in tow. Steve's hair was wet and disheveled, eyes wide with his keys in hand. When Hopper's truck came up, Steve stopped running and he stood there and his shoulders slumped in relief. He had a shirt on that was half tucked into his pants and as the truck pulled up behind Steve's car, Steve glared at both Hopper and Billy.

"Well, good luck dealing with that," Hopper muttered to Billy as he stepped out of the vehicle and swiftly closed his door behind him.

Steve had been worried, clearly worried, that Billy was going to bolt at any second. As he looked at the blonde, his resolve and anger crumbled (just a little) at Billy's expression. But they would have to get this over with, find out what Hopper had to say to all of them.

Billy wanted to shrink into the seat at the look Steve gave them. It made him feel...small, like Neil had done, but the guilt was deserved, he guessed. He opened the door and slid out of the truck. After shutting it, he hesitated in front of Steve. He obviously wanted to say something, anything, but nothing came out. It was exactly what he thought it would be, and he hated himself for it.

Instead, Billy moved into the house, his fingers itching for something to grab. After taking a shaky breath, his body beginning to vibrate with the need to just hole himself up somewhere, Billy went to the back of the house. He slid the glass door open, retrieved the orange juice and pills, and walked back in. As he did, he threw the pills back

and covered them with the liquid, swallowing them down.

The pills may fuck his head up, but at least he didn't have to feel completely there while they all talked about his shit life. He set the glass on the counter and continued to be silent.

Max and Steve passed through the kitchen together, Hopper trailed behind them. Steve glanced inside and made eye contact with Billy for a moment. He could see the glass in Billy's hand and tried to search his face for a moment, get a read on Billy, before Hopper pushed Steve slightly forward. "C'mon kid, let's get it over with," Hopper called out and corralled Steve and Max into the living room without waiting for Billy's reply.

All three of them took a seat, waiting for Billy. Steve folded his arms over his chest and nervously bounced one leg. So Billy had taken his medication, fine, good, he wasn't going to be in any pain, because Steve wanted to kill him. When he had stepped out of the shower, ready to tell Billy it was fine, Max told him he left for cigarettes. And Steve got pissed and panicked. It was clear Billy ran away, and he got that, he really did, but if he pushed himself too hard...what if Billy had gotten really hurt? Way worse than before? What if he collapsed in the middle of the goddamn road? Steve sighed and glanced up at the ceiling for a moment, he fucking hated caring about Billy Hargrove, because Steve was sure if anybody was going to explode, it was going to be him. And then that fucking look, like a contrite, kicked puppy, Steve felt so shitty as he chewed on his lower lip.

Billy slid into the living room and settled onto the couch. He sat next to Steve, but not too close, uncertain about where they stood and what he was allowed to do. His fingers moved along the frayed edges of his jean jacket again (he had slipped it on because it felt like old comfort). The glass of OJ was still in one hand. He had decided that

it would be good to have something to drink while they spoke, even if it was jilted and awful (him speaking, that is).

“So... what do you need specifics on?” Billy finally asked, trying to ignore the way Steve bounced his leg. The guy was nervous, but he also looked pissed, and Billy was weary of getting close or even *acting* like he was going to touch him. It was like their roles had switched--Billy weary of Steve instead of the other way around.

“Truth be told, I have enough for a complaint after the doctor’s report and what both you and Max had said. I’m not here for more details, I’m here to tell you what we can do.” Hopper leveled his gaze on Billy, if he told Billy what they would do, Billy would bolt. Kid had to have some control over the situation, Hopper understood that. “I managed to find Colloway sober enough to agree to a temporary restraining order hearing. That can be set up tomorrow down at the courthouse. The issue really....is going to be Max.”

Hopper had gone to the Hargroves that morning. It was hard to get a read on the stepmother, Susan. She clearly wanted her daughter back close to her, but seemed resigned and beaten. Hopper had made sure to carefully look over at her face, tried to look for some sign he could talk to her too, get them all away from Neil Hargrove, but he just couldn’t find anything there.

Mr. Hargrove didn’t care that Billy was out of the house, and if anything else, Hopper thought he might have sounded pleased about the whole thing. But Max, Neil wanted Max back and so did Susan. Hopper knew with what she had seen, what she had to do...there was something there they could use, but it would be difficult.

Max quickly interrupted, glared at Hopper, “I’m not leaving Billy,”

she replied firmly, her eyes blazing.

Billy paused, surprised by the turn of events. Max? There was a problem...? Oh. He thought about Susan, about the way she always became submissive when she saw Neil beat on Billy. Shit, Max hadn't seen it until then, but Susan... Susan had caught a lot of it, and she hadn't said anything. Billy wasn't sure if Susan was being hurt, and he had been too resentful to care. Susan could divorce Neil. She could leave if she wanted. Billy was his fucking *son* , so he had had nowhere to go. He had to just fucking deal with it.

"She doesn't have to go back, does she?" Billy tightened his grip on the glass. His other hand had gripped his knee, his fingers digging into his jeans as he tried to think of ways to keep Max out of Neil's house. What the fuck could he do, though? He was a damned *kid* . "I mean, is there something we can do...?" And then Max piped up that she wasn't leaving *him* , and Billy looked down at her in surprise. They hadn't had a great relationship. Billy had sort of fucked that over when they came to Indiana, so he had just assumed that she would want to be as far away from him as possible, if given the choice.

But she looked at Hopper, determined in her resolve. "I love my Mom, but she....she didn't do anything. She saw it, all of it too, and she....I can see her but I don't wanna be with her right now...." Max trailed off and looked down. It was something she had put a lot of thought into. When it happened, Max felt horrified by what she was seeing, when Neil dragged Billy out of his room and then just held him there as he cut Billy's hair, blood already on his face....

But there hadn't been surprise. There hadn't been shock. Her mom just didn't want to *watch* . And maybe she didn't want it to happen either, but her Mom hadn't wanted that enough to actually do

something. Max bit her lower lip hard, she didn't want to cry right now. She didn't want to cry in front of any of them, especially Billy. He was a shithead....but right now, Billy was *her* shithead, and the only one she really trusted.

Hopper sighed heavily, "I'm not going to lie, something like that is hard. Max wasn't hurt herself, but with what she did....there are a couple legal arguments I know Colloway likes to hear, some bullshit the lawyers use when it comes to kids.. But even that's just temporary, and they'll want to place her in foster care in the meantime until it's sorted out. The only thing..." Hopper stopped and took a minute, tried to think of the best way to phrase everything, to get them all on board. Hopper already saw the look on Billy's face when he said "foster care," and Max looked like she was ready to finally lose it at any given moment.

"I might be able to pull some strings and have Max stay with me and El--for a little while. Being the goddamn chief has to count for something around here."

Billy narrowed his eyes and felt his chest constrict at the idea of foster care. And then the glass shattered. He jumped, shocked, and glanced down to see the orange juice mix with blood. Oh, fuck. Fuck. Fuck. He looked at Steve, panic settling under his skin because he *knew* he had gone overboard. Again. Like he always fucking did. He gathered some of the glass that fell in his lap and ignored when they sliced into his hands (it wasn't much, though, just light cuts at this point). He stood up and walked out of the living room, his heart beating so hard against his chest that he felt dizzy.

When Billy put the broken glass in the sink, he tried to control his breathing. He leaned over the sink and clenched his jaw, wishing, somehow, that he could just scream. He didn't, though, trying to

taper off his breathing as he turned the faucet on and dropped his hand underneath it. Blood swirled down the sink and he wanted to laugh. Instead of the nails on the bat, it was a fucking glass.

He was fucked up. He was fucked up and it was ruining Max's life. He closed his eyes and wished so *hard* that the drugs would settle in already. He stopped the faucet and grabbed a paper towel to press against the deepest of his wounds.

Billy really, really wanted Steve. But instead he stood there, towel pressed into the wound, staring into the sink. Foster care? Max? And he was seventeen. He wouldn't be eighteen for another year. What would he do? He'd probably run. Knowing his behavior pattern, he'd fucking run. He'd run and make it hell and every foster parent would kick his ass out.

Steve's eyes widened and he made a startled noise in the back of his throat when the glasses shattered. Billy quickly got up and left the room and Max kept looking down. Steve could see that she started to cry, foster care probably wasn't something she had considered, and Steve wasn't even sure how much she knew about it, other than rumored horror stories. It was all Steve knew about it himself.

Steve gave a jerky little nod as he glanced worriedly between Max and Hopper, "Yeah, well have to see how...how it plays out. Thanks for coming. We'll wait to hear...about going to court." Steve swallowed, that hadn't been something Billy decided, not really, but he figured he had to say something at this point, steer the ship a little. Steve rose and Hopper rose with him as they walked to the door together.

"We can look into emancipation, Colloway isn't going to care as

much about him, it's her, and so will Neil and Susan." Hopper looked at Steve appraisingly. Steve just nodded again and muttered, "Thanks for everything."

Hopper gave him a little nod and when he stepped outside, Steve gently closed the door behind him. He stood there for a few moments and leaned his head forward against the door. He couldn't just let Billy go back there, no after what he had seen and heard—Neil might actually try to kill him before he turned 18. And Max...Jesus Christ, she had pulled a gun on him! Steve just couldn't watch either of them get fucked over like this. Life wasn't always fair, but it didn't have to be so fucking cruel either.

Steve exhaled loudly before he righted himself and marched into the living room. Max was crying in earnest and Steve gently took her hand and led her into the kitchen. Steve wasn't even sure if she was aware of what she was doing as she quietly sobbed. Steve held onto her hand as they both went into the kitchen, the only sound was Max's soft hiccups and gasps.

Billy had been so lost in his own thoughts that Hopper leaving went unnoticed. He continued to hold the now bloody paper towel to his hand as he ran scenarios through his head. He couldn't let this happen to Max. He had fucked up his own life enough simply by being who he was, by who he preferred. Max shouldn't suffer as a result, but Neil shouldn't have *power* over her, either. Billy wasn't sure how to prevent that, though. He could handle most of what Neil dished out (until recently), but the idea that he may raise a hand to Max made him see red.

When Billy heard hiccups, he finally looked up. His eyes caught Steve first and then dropped to Max. Shit. Shit. He had been so caught up in his own fuck ups that he hadn't thought about what the

conversation was doing to Max. He looked down at his hand, thought, fuck it, and walked over to Steve and Max. It was slow, as if he was being cautious (he fucking was). Slowly, Billy kneeled down in front of Max, his knees digging into the tiles.

“Hey, kiddo,” Billy murmured, “Hopper will figure it out. He won’t let anything happen to you. *I* won’t let anything happen to you. I’ll be here, yeah? We’ll figure something out.” Even if he had to take her in himself when he turned eighteen. He’d adopt the hell out of Maxine. He hesitated at first, but then slid his arms around Max’s shoulders and tugged her forward. He watched his hand, making sure not to get blood on her as he pulled her to his chest.

Max cried harder when Billy pulled her in. She threw her arms around his neck, sobbed, “Don’t talk to me like I’m an asshole, you don’t do that, you never do that...” Max squeezed her arms around his neck and harshly whispered to Billy, “She saw, why--why didn’t she do anything! Why is she there now and not--!”

Max buried her face in Billy’s neck and kept still, she knew there weren’t answers, not really, but it was just this overwhelming disappointment. It had changed her view of her mother, changed it entirely as somebody she thought she could rely on to do the right thing and protect her, well that person didn’t exist. Because Max had seen what she had done: nothing.

Her voice was a little muffled, “I just wanna stay with you right now, okay? Just....be my asshole big brother.”

Steve stood beside Max, looked down upon them. It felt so private, like he shouldn’t be there. He knew Max and Billy had a hostile relationship, when she said at the Byers’ place that Billy would kill them, part of Steve believed it. And then he saw it. All that rage and

hatred--it was only know that it made sense, but Billy's relationship with Steve wasn't the only relationship of his life.

Billy stared over Max's shoulder, but he wasn't necessarily *seeing* . He was listening to her, his hand clenched in anger. He wished he had been better to her, but tried to think about now. About tomorrow. About what he could do to make up for his shittiness. Perhaps buy her a new skateboard, for starters. He blew out a tiny breath and nodded. "Yeah, yeah. You're not goin' anywhere right now, Max. You'll stay with me." He hoped. Fuck, he really hoped that she could stay with him. If not, he wouldn't mind if Hopper had her. He'd be able to see her still.

Unfortunately, Billy didn't have answers as to why Susan never stepped in. He had apologized to her countless times after his dad went after him. Countless. But she always looked away, frowned, and shrank in on herself. He leaned back to look at Max and pushed some of her long hair out of her face. "Is there something you'd like to do today, Max? Arcade? Movie? Just tell me and we can do that. I'm sure Steve can get your sh--your friends together and you all can play whatever nerd games you play."

Max searched his face, she could see that Billy was trying, and it was more than she had seen in such a long time. "If I invite everybody over, then they're all gonna know...." Max wanted nothing more than to tell the Party, but Billy was a private person, and for the most part, so was she. This just felt too critical, too overwhelming to tell anybody in the party yet.

"I just...I want to play the campaign, but I would never...." Max swallowed, she need people around her that were her age, that she could tell secrets to. Not have Billy actually be kind to her, because that didn't happen. "Would you...be willing to play? Please?"

Steven stiffened a little at her request, it wasn't that he minded Billy was a guy, but he was terrible at keeping secrets. It seemed like the further they went down this path, the more Max would want to see her friends-it was only natural. But Dustin would give him this look and Steve wasn't sure what he would do or say. He was a pretty astute kid, so to do all this just to be nice? Steve didn't think he was that goddamn nice. Dustin would know something.

Billy opened his mouth and then closed it. Sure, he wasn't a fucking dumbass. In fact, he excelled at school. His reputation of being an asshole sort of outweighed the fact that he got good grades (god forbid if he didn't). He looked over Max's face and then chewed on his lower lip. Shit. He didn't know how to act around little kids. He definitely didn't know how to be nice to those nerds, and the fuck if he knew how to play that damned game.

"Why don't I watch? I'm not so great at those games, Max," Billy glanced over to Steve, as if asking for help because how the *hell* was he supposed to do this? "I mean. I can just sit and watch, yeah? Then, if your friends are okay with it, I'll join." But those kids hated Billy, and he knew the moment he walked in that they would go on a rant about it. Billy didn't really blame them. The last time they saw him, he had beaten in Steve's face.

Max nodded and there was a small, relieved smile on her face. Being with Billy may be reassuring, but he wasn't a peer. "Okay, I'll call them. Um, thanks, Billy." She gave him another quick hug, because this was all so new to her and grabbed the cordless phone out of the kitchen.

Steve's eyes were wide and his eyebrows were raised up, and he was

already thinking of plausible cover stories. ‘Okay, Dustin, the guy and I had—we got drunk and we *bonded* . It happens, like sometimes you just...gotta get everything out? Gotta get your face beaten in? You gotta beat up each other—no that’s not what happened—okay, get *it all out* , and then you’re just cool. You’ll understand when you’re older. Yeah, okay, that kinda makes sense. I got this, I got this, he’s a kid so I can fucking do this.’

Billy watched Max leave and then allowed his shoulders to finally sag. He pushed himself up slowly, and when he finally got to his feet, the world tilted. Oh. The medication finally kicked in. He looked at Steve, furrowing his brow before making his way to the kitchen table. When he sat in one of the chairs, he let out a sharp breath. He unwrapped his hand to look at the cuts. At least they had stopped bleeding, but he still needed to clean up the rest of the mess in the living room.

“ You left a mess in my home and I expect it to be cleaned.”

His dad’s words clanged around in his head, making his ears ring. He settled his arms on the table and then put his forehead on them. He was a fucking coward. He hadn’t even said anything to Steve. He wasn’t sure what to say. He was sorry? Steve would just laugh at him. Billy kept fucking up, so why should he think his apology would make a difference?

Steve frowned and diverted his attention back to Billy, of course he was going to have more important concerns than Steve. Steve approached him and reached out, gently placed his hand on his shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay, we’ll figure it out.” All of Steve’s anger from before was gone, and he didn’t usually stay angry for very long anyway. All of his concern for Billy and this shitty situation overtook that petty bullshit from before. He squeezed his shoulder slowly and

bent down, kissed his temple once.

Steve knew what Billy had done, was currently doing, he ran and wallowed. How could Steve see this so quickly after such little time together? “Just stay with me, okay Hargrove? We’ll have another stupid night and I’ll just....it’ll be okay. For both Max and you.” Steve moved his fingers gently into Billy’s hair, twirled a finger a little around one of the soft curls there. “I’m not....going anywhere, just talk when you’re ready. I need to make you something to eat, if you took those pills, you need something.”

Billy sucked in a sharp breath when Steve touched him, as if that was the last thing he thought the other boy would do (because it fucking was). He twitched and turned his head so that when he opened his eyes, he could look at Steve. He focused on him and tried to ignore the guilt that rushed through his body. Why was he so fucked up?

“I’m sorry,” Billy finally managed, “I know. I *know* it doesn’t mean shit. I can’t--I’m not good with words. I’m not good--” with anything, “but I’ll try, I promise. I’m sorry.”

Steve blinked in surprise at Billy’s admission, he knew that, of course Steve knew that. It was just actually hearing him say it....Steve smiled softly and bent down, kissed Billy’s slowly and murmured against his lips, “I know that. I was just a little mad earlier, but it’s over and I was just...worried. You just keep pushing yourself and I want to...I don’t know, make it easier somehow and I don’t exactly know how to do that. So we’ll just...fuck up together, right?” Steve pulled back a little to look at Billy’s face, still smiling. “I’ll make you a really shitty sandwich and we’ll call it even.”

Billy squeezed his eyes shut as Steve pressed their lips together. He

let out a little breath and his muscles fucking relaxed. He finally felt okay after feeling so strung up, so fucking tightly wound. He opened his eyes again to look at Steve and offered his own, smaller smile in return. "I didn't think you were much of a cook, anyway, Harrington," he murmured, but he was teasing, "but a sandwich is a sandwich, I think. And it'll be great, because it's made by Steve Harrington..." The drugs may or may not have kicked in at this point (they had).

Steve blinked again before he laughed loudly in surprise, he looked over Billy's face, his eyes a little too wide, but still unseeing. Well, a subdued Billy probably wasn't going to be a bad thing with the kids coming over. He kissed Billy again before he quietly padded around the kitchen, a smile still on his face. He would have to go grocery shopping soon, with Max and Billy staying here. It was kinda nice to Steve, just having people in the house with him. Even when his parents were home, they weren't really interested in him and what he did, so long as it didn't interfere with their lives or plans for him.

It was just a ham and swiss sandwich that he set down before Billy. Steve squeezed his hand on Billy's shoulder before he got the snacks ready for the little shits. Dustin insisted that Steve have snacks ready whenever Steve hosted and Dustin made it a big point to have Steve watch him when Dustin prepared to have the party over--there had to be snacks. There had to be atmosphere. There had to be different activities that were tentatively available. Steve thought it was horribly condescending but Dustin made a point, guests were guests.

Billy returned the kiss lightly and then watched Steve wander around the kitchen. When the food was placed in front of him, he pushed himself into a sitting position and ran his fingers through his hair. The silence between him and Steve was nice. It wasn't tense. It didn't make Billy's skin crawl. It just was, and it may or may not have been the drugs, but he blamed how Steve had kissed him and spoken to him. It had eased this fear of him doing something terribly wrong.

After he gathered the sandwich into his hands, he leaned back in the chair and continued to watch Steve as he gathered snacks. He took small bites out of the sandwich, not having realized, until then, how hungry he was. It just reminded him of breakfast and what he had said to Steve, and how fucking upset the guy had looked. His stomach turned and he put the sandwich back down onto the plate. It was okay. Steve said it was. He closed his eyes and then breathed out slowly.

“You’re cute,” Billy stated, matter-of-factly. It was to distract his brain. Either guilt-ridden or Steve obsessed. He chose Steve-obsessed.

Steve’s movements stuttered a little as he looked over at Billy in surprise. He laughed and shook his head. “Yeah? And your meds are kicking in, buddy.” It was something Steve had probably said to several girls, but he could practically hear Nancy, ‘You’re an idiot, Steve Harrington.’

Steve smiled and put some cookies on a tray, he didn’t even like this kind--it was yet another thing Dustin insisted he buy since Dustin, Mike, and Lucas (but not Will), liked this brand. Steve lined up a couple bowls of food, it probably meant he was going to have to get pizza again. That couldn’t have been good, maybe he could pick up some burgers and fries instead. The boys basically ate anything they were given.

He glanced back over at Billy and arched an eyebrow. “Finish your damn sandwich, I slaved for a good five minutes over that.”

“Shoulda took them sooner,” Billy conceded, and it was as close to

‘you were right’ as Steve was ever going to get from him. He looked down at his sandwich and scoffed. “You--what, you slaved over a hot stove for five minutes? Exhausted yourself, yeah?” Billy grinned, but he did exactly what Steve asked, picking up the sandwich and continuing to eat the thing. It wasn’t bad, actually, but it may just be the drugs. Steve probably did suck at making food; he was sure that the medicine he took just made it taste good.

“You... Take care of people well,” Billy began, watching as Steve sorted bowls and food. “I mean--shit. I mean that you, it’s surprising, considering...” His parents weren’t there. How did he turn out so good? It didn’t make sense to Billy. “I sound like an idiot. You’re just good at taking care of people. That’s all.”

Steve felt really embarrassed listening to Billy compliment him. He flushed softly and cleared his throat. It wasn’t something he set out to do, not really. And Steve felt fairly confident he failed at it most of the time, it wasn’t sweet, not like what he tried to do with Nancy. Steve had tried to be a really good person to her, for her. He knew he could get abrasive with the little shits, but he also cared about them and felt fiercely protective. Steve tried to think of himself more like a big brother to them, just keep them out of trouble. So much had changed after one run in with Dustin.

“It’s nothing really, you’re just—“ Steve was going to say being nice, but this was Billy, “Medicated. And Dustin will yell at me if I don’t do this and I just don’t wanna hear it.” Steve shrugged and smiled, “It’s nothing. Honestly, don’t worry about it.” Steve finished the snacks and moved back over to Billy.

Billy raised an eyebrow at the comment about him being medicated. It was true, sure, but that didn’t mean he didn’t appreciate Steve. Then again, it took him being *medicated* to say something nice to

Steve--and wasn't that just entirely too fucked up? He shifted in his seat and wished he felt this *okay* to talk on a regular basis. Hell, maybe then he would be able to keep Steve around without pissing him off.

"I don't think I'm lying, even if I am 'medicated'," Billy lifted one shoulder in a shrug and felt that same warmth spread through his body as Steve moved back over to him. He reached out and slid an arm around Steve's waist. He tugged him closer and pressed his cheek to Steve's stomach. Honestly, if this is what medicated felt like, maybe he should just stay fucking medicated.

Steve stumbled into Billy and made a little noise of surprise as Billy pressed against him. He laughed softly and gently touched Billy's head. Steve wasn't cold, but when he felt Billy's warmth, he couldn't help but shiver. "I never said you were lying, all of that just feels different to me." Like Billy made him into this really great person that Steve didn't feel like he really was.

He knew Billy was being genuine, because Steve thought that even when Billy was being a total asshole, Billy was still being his own version of being genuine. Steve never really thought for one moment that Billy was bullshit. Billy ran because concocting bullshit was hard for him—Steve didn't think so much of his asshole personality was anything more than a wall to hide behind for protection. Steve slowly ran a hand through Billy's hair.

"Well, it's the truth," Billy insisted and as Steve's fingers carded through his hair, the muscles in his shoulders relaxed. He gazed into the kitchen, not really seeing, his thoughts sluggish but still there. The pain had ebbed away, but he still struggled with the idea that he was mentally unaware. Sure, he could hear Steve, he could respond, yet he was slow to respond and that bite he normally had was gone.

Pain medication softened him.

"I saw my hair," Billy spoke up after a moment, only because Steve's fingers were in it. Otherwise, he probably wouldn't have thought about it. "Doesn't look like shit, Harrington. Y'did... a good job. I don't look like shit." He repeated the last line and squeezed his arm around Steve's waist. He didn't *look* like shit, but he obviously felt like it. The lingering assumption was there, and Billy fell silent again.

Steve turned a little, faced Billy, and smiled down at him. "Well, I have news for you Hargrove, and I'm hoping you're a little too loopy to remember this, but you were never going to look like shit. I can always take you to somebody who actually knows what they're doing." Steve tucked some of Billy's hair behind his uninjured ear.

"You should probably lay down before the little shits get here. They can be...well. A lot." If the kids continued the campaign, and Steve was forced to play, that would be greatly amusing for Billy. Steve sucked at that shit, didn't understand half the rules, and was constantly berated by children. Steve hadn't been forced to play yet, Dustin liked to remind him that he wasn't *ready*, whatever the hell that meant.

Billy raised an eyebrow at the comment about hoping he was too loopy, but let it go. His fingers pressed into Steve's side and his eyelids fluttered as Steve tucked some of his curls back. The idea of going to an actual stylist stressed him out, even with the numbing of the medication, so he let that idea fall away from him. He didn't care if some of it was uneven. It would eventually grow to a length he liked, and then he'd deal with it himself.

"Where d'you want me to lay down?" Billy didn't want to go to a

bedroom. That sounded so ridiculous and so *dependent* that his cheeks flushed, even if he didn't say it. Instead, he shifted in his chair and tilted his head back so he could look at Steve (even if the world sort of tilted when he did so). "Living room?"

"Yeah, that's fine." Steve searched Billy's face and smiled wider, if anything he found Billy really cute like this, vulnerable in a strange way. He would probably be normal before the kids came over, which was for the best because Billy probably didn't want people seeing him like this. Steve gently stroked his thumb over Billy's left cheek. He hadn't been lying, Billy was so beautiful it was physically painful. And to be able to see Billy like this, open and real, it just made Steve feel incredibly special and honored to even be remotely a part of it.

Steve bent over and gently cupped Billy's cheeks. He kissed Billy slowly, took his time to explore his mouth and feel him. He felt, rather than heard, the small hitch of Billy's breath. So many terrible fucking things happened to Billy that some blossoming part of Steve really wanted to show Billy true affection, actually romance him, because it was just something he thought Billy *deserved*. Steve pulled away and rested his forehead lightly against Billy's. "Let me get you up, tough guy."

The medication may have made it difficult for Billy to concentrate, but once Steve's lips were on his, once his breath stuttered in his chest, he was gone. He opened so easily for Steve, allowing him full access, and his muddled brain wondered if it was just the kiss--if he had only opened up *that way* and not other ways, too. He returned the kiss, but it was slow and slightly off (fuck medication, seriously). Still, it seemed as if Billy was just content to feel Steve against him, even if it wasn't sexual.

"I don't want you to get up," Billy muttered in protest but sighed and

did as he was told. His cheeks *might* have tinted pink at the name, and his eyes may have flickered away, but his lips were quirked into a tiny smile. “To the living room, I guess.” He pushed himself up from the chair and squeezed Steve’s hand before letting go to walk into the living room.

Max was sitting on the couch when they went into the living room together. She eyed Billy before she got up for him, sensing he needed to rest and he really looked it at the moment. Steve made sure Billy made it to the couch before he grabbed a throw and handed it off to him. “Get your stuff and we’ll head out.” Max glanced at Billy again before she raced out of the room, a little excited just to have something normal that day.

Steve watched Billy arrange himself carefully on the couch and he frowned, Billy really was pushing himself and Steve felt a pang of guilt for his role in that. “I’ll pick up some food for everybody, so just rest. And when they get here, don’t...well, just tell me if you need something.” The little shits were a lot to handle together and the last thing Steve wanted was Billy stressing himself.

By the time the blanket was handed to him, Billy realized he was exhausted. He guessed that lying down did that. As he shifted on the couch, his mind started to float. It was strange to think that he was on Steve’s couch, that Max was in the living room with him, and that he didn’t have to go back to that house with Neil. It was even stranger that he didn’t *mind* being here with Steve. Maybe anywhere was okay without Neil, but this... this was so much better.

“Just let me know if you need me to do anything,” Billy mumbled, but sleep was pulling at him. He shifted again so that he was facing the back of the couch. It’d be easier to ignore the middle schoolers if he wasn’t facing them. Maybe, it’d be even *easier* if he was asleep. He

sighed and closed his eyes, ready for the day to be fucking over with.

Steve watched him for a moment before he smiled, shook his head, and muttered, "Jesus Christ." He stepped over to Billy, unfolded the blanket, and placed it over him. The guy was really overdoing it. Steve looked at his face for a moment before he went to the foyer, grabbed his keys from a small table beside the door, and called out for Max. He waited there for a moment and opened the door. After a few minutes, he was ready to yell for her again when she came bounding out into the room and raced past him to his car. Steve sighed, this was going to be a trying day.

10. Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

It's so fluffy, you're gonna die!

(It proceeds super angst and smut, so soak it in while you can, campers.)

It seemed that Max made the arrangements for all four of the boys and Steve was nervous, unsure of what exactly they knew. He picked up Mike and Will first before he swung over to Lucas' house. Each of the kids were talking over each other and Steve glanced back in the rearview to watch Max talking animatedly, as long as she had a good day it would all be worth it. Steve finally pulled up to Dustin's house and honked his horn. He felt nervous, Max had called Dustin, and there was no way Dustin wouldn't have questions for him, and Steve honestly wasn't sure what to tell him.

They waited for five minutes before Steve laid on the horn again in irritation.

There was a clattering from inside, some noises, and suddenly, the screen door popped open with a loud crash. Dustin stumbled out and then grinned. "Hey! Yeah, sorry, sorry, I'm coming." He turned around and waved at his mother, who blew a kiss at him. After making a face, he turned around and jogged up to the car. The bag on his shoulder bounced against his back, but he didn't seem to mind.

After throwing the door open, Dustin climbed in and looked from Max to Steve. He yanked his seatbelt on and then settled in, questions buzzing in his head. He hadn't told the Party about the phone call, but he was curious, and it was *hard* for him to not ask. With all the other kids chattering, he was able to look at Steve through the corner

of his eye.

“Sooooo... What did Billy want?”

Steve glanced in the rearview again and could see that Max was looking directly at him. No matter how much he wanted to tell Dustin what happened, and what was happening with him (even though the idea of Dustin judging him made Steve incredibly apprehensive), it wasn't really Steve's story to tell. Steve was peripherally involved, but it really concerned Billy and Max. Steve felt uncomfortable casually discussing it, even if Dustin wouldn't know just how close Steve had gotten to the whole situation.

Steve shrugged a little, “He just needed my help with something. He's...at the house. So do your best not to be a little dickhead.” Yet another thing that was going to shock the kid, Billy and Steve weren't friends as far as any of them knew. Billy was an asshole who beat the shit out of hit. Billy was an asshole who grabbed Lucas. Billy was an asshole who terrorized his little sister. The only thing Billy *wasn't* was a member of the party. Steve cleared his throat, “So, I was thinking burgers or something.”

Dustin's eyebrows nearly leapt off his head. He looked from Max to Steve, and then again, as if he couldn't comprehend what Steve had just said. “Wait-- *wait* --that asshole is at your *house* ? At the house that we are going to? That *Lucas* is going to? I dunno if you hit your head or something, Steve, but he *so* tried to kill Lucas! He tried to kill you! What if he is plotting to kill us *right now* ??”

The last time Dustin had seen Billy was when he had bloodied Steve's face-- *hardcore* . The guy had *laughed* after being punched several times and that wasn't normal! Billy wasn't normal! He looked at the

others expectantly, but when his eyes fell to Max, he squinted. “Is there something we need to know about? The Party? And what about our opinions on him? We can’t play with him there!”

Steve knew this was going to happen as soon as Max asked. Neither she nor Billy was going to offer up everything that happened, so Steve was stuck in this position where he had to keep their confidentiality while also wrangling the brats. “Hey! He’s fine, he’s *not* going to kill anybody, and you little shitheads are going to be on your best goddamn behavior, does everybody get that??”

They were going to see the bruises on Billy’s face, his hair different, the stitches in his ear--none of them were stupid. They would know that something happened, and while Steve briefly worried that they would think that he did that to Billy, he begrudgingly realized that probably none of the kids would think he could hold his own like that against Billy. “Now, we’re gonna get some burgers and play your game with the dungeons.”

Dustin narrowed his eyes on Steve and then huffed. He slouched into his seat and stared out the window. After a moment, he looked back, “But what *if* ...” He started, and then thought better of it when his seat rattled (Max probably kicked it?). He pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m just looking out for the Party, that’s all--”

And then Steve was offering burgers, and suddenly Dustin forgot about the blonde sleeping on Steve’s couch. “Oh *man* , can I get fries, too? Shit, and a milkshake!” It seemed that food was a definite way to the kid’s heart, or at least, an easy distraction from Billy until they were in the house.

“Watch your goddamn language, man! The way *I* talk and the way *you* need to talk are totally different--you mom is going to get on my ass if you keep it up!” Steve sighed heavily, it wouldn’t be the worst thing just to appease all the kids. If he singled it out for Max, it would just seem really obvious. Steve grumbled, “Fries and shakes for everybody, alright?” And then the kids were yelling loudly in his car again.

He went through the drive-thru, yelled at each one of the kids multiple times to get the order right and to pick up the pace. The kids shouted their orders back at Steve and then changed their minds--multiple times. Each one of them had been here how many damn times and they didn’t know what they wanted? Steve got a large burger, fries, and strawberry shake for Billy. He didn’t really know if he would like it, but Steve supposed if he had to make something for just Billy, that would be fine.

Steve drove back to his house and the kids were out of the car before he parked. He sat there in the car for a moment, gritted his teeth, and looked at the massive bags of food. “Guess, I’ll just take this inside....thanks for the help guys.” Steve muttered as he gathered everything up and headed inside.

Dustin, by the time Steve rolled up into the drive, was ready to launch out the door. One, because food, two, because *hello* games, and again, *food* . He turned to the car and grinned as the others clambered out and ran after him. When they got to the door, Dustin gave Steve a look and crossed his arms over his chest. “You know, for being such a big guy, you complain a lot about doing nothing.” He rolled his eyes and shifted his feet, obviously ready to get in and start playing Dungeons and Dragons. “I mean, those bags are like, what, five pounds? Weak, man.”

The kids weren’t exactly quiet, and although Billy had passed out not long after they had left, the noise roused him. He was used to paying

attention to noise, even in his sleep (fuck his dad for his random rages). Billy blinked slowly and then his eyelids fell again. Shit. He really just wanted to sleep. Maybe he could sleep through the noise (who the fuck was he kidding? These were middle schoolers and they were *loud*). He grunted and pulled the blanket over his head.

Steve gave Dustin the dirtiest look he could muster when he dragged himself into the kitchen with the food. He grabbed several plates and some of the snack bowls he prepared earlier. Steve briefly passed the living room and spotted a large mass on the sofa, Steve grumbled a little, thinking Billy had the right idea all along. He directed the kids to the sitting room to give Billy some peace and quiet. His mother hated having people in there, but Steve figured he could just clean it before she got back--so long as the kids didn't spill.

Steve made three trips with their food before he grabbed his own food and Billy's. Steve made his way to the living room before Mike careened right into him, and Steve's chocolate shake exploded all over his sweater. Mike looked at him, his eyes wide with shock and a sorry tumbling out of his mouth before Mike laughed loudly instead. Some of the chocolate had gotten in Steve's hair and splattered on his face. "WHEELER, WHAT THE HELL, MAN!"

Dustin grinned cheekily at the glare, not bothering to help because, simply, why? He had his bag and they *needed* to get started. Carrying stuff could come later. He followed everyone in the house and then froze as the milkshake exploded all over Steve. For a moment, he tried really hard not to laugh, his eyes squinting more and more as the grin spread over his cheeks. Then, finally, when he couldn't handle it anymore, he burst into a fit of laughter. "Oh, man, Mike, he's gonna *kill you* ! You don't even have to worry about Billy doing it!"

Billy squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. Children. Fucking. Sucked. He ran his palm carefully over his face and then pushed himself up. The world spun at first and his body began to ache again. Shit. He looked around at first, and then caught sight of some of the shorter heads and then Steve, completely flabbergasted and covered in milkshake. "That's some spill on you, Harrington," Billy mused, but his voice was quiet because his head had started to hurt again. He wasn't even sure if Steve had heard him.

Steve's eyes widened in embarrassment when he heard Billy speak and he turned his head towards him, fuck they had woken him up. The kids were still laughing for a moment before some of them actually took a look at Billy. Luckily the worst of it was covered, but even still, it was painfully obvious Billy had gotten beat up. Chocolate dripped down Steve's pants and he could feel a clump of wet hair against his forehead. Steve turned to the kids and hissed, "Get in the other fucking room before you spill something else!" He jerked his body towards Mike and Dustin and stomped one foot towards them menacingly as they ran off around the hall.

Well, this sweater was fucking ruined. Steve sighed and extended the small bag and shake out to Billy. "Brought you food."

Billy smiled a bit to himself as soon as the kids were out of sight. He took in Steve and shook his head. He regretted it immediately and pushed himself up and off the couch. After steadying himself, he walked up to Steve and slid his fingers over some of the milkshake on his forehead. He licked it off of his fingers and grinned. "Why don't you go get something else on?" he murmured, "I'll get the food to the kids. You don't want to drip that shit on the carpet. It'll stain."

Without waiting for a response, Billy took the bag of his own food from Steve and walked around him. He was sure Steve wanted to

keep whatever they had private, so he didn't say a word (and besides, it was like Billy to taunt Steve, so he could brush that off easily). "You want them to eat on plates, Harrington? Less of a chance of spilling, I guess."

Steve blinked in surprise, "Uh, yeah, please." He was really shocked that Billy was involving himself with the brats, especially since Steve was sure Billy clearly just wanted to rest. But Billy had promised Max and it seemed that Billy intended to make good on his promise. Steve watched Billy pad to the kitchen before he headed upstairs.

Steve hit the bathroom light on and growled in frustration, his hair was totally fucked, and if he spent too much time in there now, the bastards would give him grief for it. He turned on the sink and dunked his head under, quickly washed his face, and ran half his hair under some hot water. When Steve came back up, his hair splayed over his forehead. Steve grimaced, he was going to fucking kill Wheeler. He hurried to his room and grabbed an old pair of jeans and an ugly, but comfortable, green sweater. Steve glanced in the mirror once and sighed: who the fuck was he kidding at this point, he looked like a goddamn mess. Steve made a face and dragged himself back downstairs.

Billy had done exactly what he said he would. Although, as he entered the room carrying plates, the stares and the quietness of the room made him roll his eyes. After he set the plates down and returned with the rest, he cocked his head to the side and looked over them. He had promised Max he'd stick around, and he planned on it, but these kids were far too tense, even for him.

"You all are annoying," Billy managed to huff out before he turned on his heel and walked out.

“He’s going to kill us,” Dustin mouthed at the others, his eyes uncharacteristically wide. He had noted the damage on Billy’s face and the odd way that he walked, but *still* . A tiger could still kill, even injured! He shifted his eyes to Billy’s back and looked at the others imploringly.

Billy walked around to the stairs just as Steve hit the bottom step. He stopped immediately and then smiled at him. “Hey. You--you look like my mom used to when she was fed up.” He chuckled to himself and reached up to push some of the wet strands from Steve’s face. They were out of range enough with the kids that he was okay touching, in murmuring, and he was so damned amused by the fed up expression on Steve’s face.

Steve gave him a tight, unamused expression. “Yeah? That’s funny because my solution is to fucking murder all of them before the night is over.” Steve sighed as Billy toyed a little with his hair. “Did you sleep okay? Before we woke you up?” Steve tried to search Billy’s face for any signs of deep exhaustion, regardless of what Max wanted, Billy had to take it easy.

As Billy continued to play with his hair, Steve tsked at him. “Don’t, you’re just gonna--” Steve swatted his hands away and reached up, rapidly combing his fingers through his hair to the side.

“I don’t even think that was sleep,” Billy admitted. It felt like he had passed out and was dead to the world. It was a good thing, but he wished (and wouldn’t tell Steve), that he could have done it longer. He grinned as his hand was swatted away and stepped back so that Steve could walk away if he wanted to. “You look fine, Steve. I don’t think the kids are going to like you any less if your hair isn’t perfect.”

Although, Billy found it amusing that Steve worried that much about it. Hell, Steve could just let his hair stay that way and Billy would be fine with it. He looked back toward the small room and flexed his fingers. He would have to be in there, with them, because he told Max he would. Yet, his stomach clenched at the idea of being around people right now.

Billy tried to inform his nerves that children were *not* people, just bugs, basically. He could handle that, right? God, kids sucked. He blew out a small breath. "You ready to babysit, Harrington?"

Steve could just--he could *feel* his hair getting poofy, and that was really pissing him off. He forced himself to stop touching it and exhaled loudly before he gave Billy a curious look at the question. "Are you kidding me, Hargrove? You're going to be the one that makes it so *I* don't totally lose my shit. Let's eat, I'm starving."

Steve stepped down and walked into the sitting room. He grabbed their bags of food and he was not going to bother with a plate. There was a spot next to him and he could see the kids digging into the food and setting up the game. Steve had already forgotten about half the things that Dustin explained to him already. Steve unwrapped his burger and took a large bite, he just needed to get through this goddamn night, just one night with the kids all poking at him with Max tight-lipped and Billy, beat up and attending a party gathering. He could do that, he could deal with that. Steve grabbed Billy's shake and took a big gulp before he set it back down beside him.

Billy tried not to laugh. The idea of Steve losing his shit was hilarious to him, so maybe he'd just sit back and not even try to help. Maybe. He followed Steve into the sitting room and settled down next to him.

He made sure not to touch because he just... wasn't sure, so he left space between them. He took his bag of food and unwrapped his own burger. He ignored the looks from the brats and began to eat, quietly, although his shoulders were taut and his heel was bouncing on the ground.

Dustin had looked at Billy again, his eyes flickering over the damage. There was no way Steve could have done that. The guy barely held his own against Billy, so something else had happened. He looked back at Max and chewed on a fry. He'd figure it out eventually--they all would. For now, he was going to concentrate on the game and ignore the fact that Billy looked like a wet cat about to bolt out of the tub.

Steve could feel the nervousness radiating off Billy and it was really fucking weird to not touch him after everything that had happened. Sure, only Max had an idea of what was going on between him and Billy, but he didn't want to hang him out to dry. Billy was never quiet and his foot was tapping on the floor like a jackhammer. When the kids were slightly distracted, Steve adjusted on the sofa. It wasn't a big movement, but their shoulders were now brushing against each other.

Steve stole a fry of Billy's and looked back at the kids. He really wished he understood the game, Dustin got so excited talking about it, but it just made no sense to him. The little book Dustin had lent him made shit even more confusing. Will grabbed a bunch of chips from the bowl, knocking some onto the ground. Steve made a small noise in the back of his throat when Lucas stepped on half of them by accident.

Billy could feel the brush of Steve's shoulder and he relaxed. Not entirely all the way, but the tapping went down some. He glanced

over at him and then grinned as Steve became distraught over the carpet. Seriously. He wondered if it was his mother's doing. It would make sense. Steve seemed like he'd take after his mom. Before he could stop himself, he reached over and brushed the back of his knuckles across Steve's hip before returning to his burger.

"Y'shits should be careful. It isn't your house," Billy's eyes fell on them and Dustin made a choked noise in his throat. He shifted on the carpet and mumbled something about how they *could have* had it somewhere else, but the sharp look Billy sent him shut him up. He stuck his tongue out at Steve in retaliation for Billy and turned to help Mike pick up the chip pieces.

And for a moment, Billy realized he had taken on some sort of role, and it made his skin burn. Shit. He glanced over at Steve and then down to his burger, pretending he *hadn't* noticed how *dad-like* that sounded.

It was mostly quiet for a few, uncomfortable moments, before there was a small snort. Steve's cheeks pinkened as he began to chuckle and then soon, he couldn't *stop* laughing. He bent forward a little, tried to get a hold of himself and shook his head. He mumbled "I'm okay, I'm okay," but that just made him laugh harder. Tears sprung to his eyes and his stomach clenched as he fell a little to the side of the couch--that was all it took.

Just a few words from Billy and the little fuckers were done, shit, he could have used him as an ally to keep the little bastards out of the Upside-Down. Just end that shit, but instead, Steve got the ass beating of a lifetime. Steve laughed so hard that he slipped a little down, leaned back into the couch. His head tilted back as he looked at the ceiling, and now, *now*, all he wanted to do was fucking make out with the guy. Steve's laughter slowed as he wiped the tears from

his face and sighed happily, “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Billy blinked at the way Steve started to laugh, surprised by it. He watched him, burger in hand, completely thrown off. It wasn't *bad* . It just wasn't a reaction that Billy expected. He reached out for a moment and then froze, realizing what it could look like, and dropped his arm as Steve flopped off the couch. His gaze finally flickered away from Steve to the kids and he furrowed his brows.

“Is he always like this?” Billy asked, his eyebrow raising.

“Dumber, usually,” Dustin replied easily and then paused. Oh. Okay, that was okay, right? He looked over to Billy and then returned his grin.

“He can get dumber, huh...” Billy looked down again at Steve and tried to keep the fondness out of his voice. He succeeded, but he knew Steve would be able to tell.

“Lots. You don't even know,” Dustin shrugged and went back to his fries.

“Shut the hell up and start your dumb game Henderson,” Steve retorted, and that was of course the wrong thing to say, after all the “progress” Dustin made with Steve. There was a chorus of groans and Steve looked up at Billy with a small grin. Steve stayed on the ground, his head right by Billy's leg.

Hell, maybe Billy would be able to keep up with the little bastards and he could just run the occasional interference. Steve was fine with that. Steve sighed, "So what's my character again?"

"You're a ranger," Mike supplied quickly.

Steve's brow furrowed, "What the hell is a ranger? What the hell kind of shit job is that?"

There were more groans, Will looked at Steve and explained, "He's like Aragorn from Lord of the Rings," as if that explained anything. Steve blinked and shook his head. He grabbed Billy's shake again and took a drink.

Before Dustin could reply, Billy had pinched the bridge of his nose before remembering it was bruised. He hissed and then sighed.

"A ranger, dumb ass," he ignored Dustin's ' *language* ', "is like a hunter. A guide, maybe even a tracker. They basically scout the area and keep the other dipshits from doing anything stupid." Billy's voice trailed off as he spoke, and as he did, Dustin's eyes got wider and wider.

"No way ," Dustin breathed and looked at Steve. "You didn't tell us he *knew* about this shit!"

"Jesus," Billy took a bite of his burger as an excuse *not to fucking talk*

.

Steve arched an eyebrow at Billy, but of course he hadn't known that either. Steve smirked a little, there was just so much more to the guy, it was really strange. "Fine, I'll take *that* shitty job. Gimme my character sheet." When Will handed it to him, it just looked like a bunch of gibberish to him and he sighed.

The kids started peppering Billy with questions and even Max looked genuinely surprised. Steve wondered how much they shared with each other before, how much they knew about each other. Billy was a pretty private person, probably had to be by design, but even Steve was curious. How much was there to Billy Hargrove? When Billy caught Steve looking at him, he flashed the blonde a genuine smile. Billy probably didn't even realize he already won half the battle.

By the time Billy actually got through his meal, it had turned cold. He was actually finding it *okay* to engage with the smaller, more irritating human beings. His eyes flickered over them as he spoke. Sometimes it was a little snappy, but the kids just took it with stride and kept asking him questions. After the last couple of days, Billy found it relaxing just to talk and not worry about shit. It was difficult at first, his mind creeping back to the house and Neil every once in awhile, but eventually, he was wrapped up in the game with the kids. He wasn't about to play, but after he slid down on the floor to look over Dustin's character sheet (who the fuck thought he would do that), he was grinning and pointing fun at him (and a couple of the other kids' characters).

"What do you mean *mine* could be beaten easily?! That's a load! I can take on anything," Dustin puffed out his chest and Billy rolled his eyes.

“Unless they rolled the right damn number. Then you’d be killed, and your armor is shit, so then what?” Billy raised an eyebrow and Dustin sputtered.

“Well, *obviously* the die rolls in my favor,” Dustin grumbled and Billy snorted.

“Max’s character would whoop you,” Billy stated easily and then sat back, listening to the sudden outbursts that had caused.

They hadn’t even started truly playing. They had been talking about characters and what had happened thus far. Billy was having a fun time poking and prodding, forcing the kids to look at weaknesses and the “what ifs.”

Steve watched Billy carefully, watched Billy rebuff and counter their arguments with their warmth spreading throughout his body. He stayed quiet for the most part, simply let Billy interact with them. Once he interacted with them again, it had actually been several hours. They played the game for another two hours, while Steve made an excuse to do something else around the house and let Billy play his character. Steve figured Billy would do better at keeping him alive.

When it was a little after 9, Steve announced the campaign would have to continue another time since he had to take them home. The kids were irritated, but Steve didn’t want to risk the wrath of their parents on a school night. But even Billy seemed a little disappointed as Steve rounded them up, along with all their things.

By the end of the game, Billy was almost laughing. It hurt to laugh, but it felt *good* being able to just relax and do something that wouldn't lead to a fight. His eyes had lulled at some point, a fondness starting behind those blues as he watched the kids pick up their things. When Dustin stopped by him, he raised an eyebrow.

"So... you're *not* gonna kill us, right?" Dustin coughed and gave a tiny grin.

"Not in real life, no," Billy mused and then snorted as Dustin gasped, dramatically.

"Not cool, man. Not fucking cool!"

"Language," Billy reminded him as the kids filed out. His eyes flickered each of them and then he hesitated. Before Lucas could go, he settled a hand on his shoulder and glanced down at him. The others had walked forward, so they couldn't hear much of what he was saying. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "I truly am, kid. It's... not--that's not me. But yeah. Sorry." He shrugged, pulled his hand away, and walked toward the kitchen. He needed to take his medication--the headache pulsing in his head was now overbearing. The kids had distracted him from it for a while.

Steve yelled at the kids to get their things and head out to the car, they didn't listen for the most part and ran around Steve's house. Steve watched the small and quiet moment between Billy and Lucas before Billy left as abruptly as he initiated the conversation. Lucas looked surprised before he approached Max and Steve watched them speak in low tones.

Steve made his way into the kitchen and leaned against the counter. "I'll take them back now and you can get some rest, yeah?" He studied Billy's face and could see that he struggled with the pain, especially if he was just taking the meds without Steve's prompting. "Just uh, just go up to my room when they're gone. It's probably close for Max to go to bed anyway."

"You inviting me to something, Harrington?" Billy mused, his eyes glittering again with his normal mischief. Although, it was nice compared to how shitty he felt. Physically, of course, because those few hours with the brats actually put him in a good mood. He squeezed Steve's hand and grinned before walking back to the sitting room.

Deciding that he could help Steve out a bit, Billy gathered the dishes and stacked them up. After his comment, the brats had actually managed to keep it pretty clean. Granted, they were kids, so, they were a mess. He brought the dishes to the kitchen and threw Steve a small grin. He would never admit that helping Steve with something so simple made him feel *good* about who he was.

Steve laughed softly as he watched Billy putter around the kitchen, actually helping him. He would never admit it, but the truth was that he actually found the whole thing kinda hot. Steve saw yet another side to Billy Hargrove and if anything, Billy was the one who made his time with the kids bearable that evening--even if they all decided to gang up on him.

Steve captured Billy's hand for a moment and leaned in, his lips hovered above Billy's, "Maybe if you're good later, I am." Steve grinned rakishly and squeezed Billy's hand softly before he gave him a light kiss and walked away, laughing. As soon as he was out of the kitchen, Steve spotted Max pulling out her school books in the living

room. He barked orders at the boys and forced them into the car, their actual parents could deal with how hyper and awake they were, not him.

Steve dropped off all the kids, once again leaving Dustin alone with him.

Billy eyes widened in surprise to Steve's remark. He was used to playful banter, sure, but Steve never came off as the dirty-talking type. He chuckled, though, and returned the light kiss before leaning against the counter. He watched Steve walk away, his gaze falling to his ass for a moment while his grin spread. He licked along his teeth and shook his head before going back to cleaning up. Fucking Harrington.

As Dustin found himself alone with Steve, he glanced over at him and tried a low whistle. "Soooo, Billy... He and Max staying with you, then? 'Cause they looked all cosy and stuff." He tapped his fingers against his legs and looked back to Steve after looking out the window. "Y'know, not that it makes a difference. Or anything. Just looked a little weird, 'cause you're kinda a wimp and, y'know." He grinned.

Steve sighed heavily and leaned back in his seat, he turned his head to the side to look at Dustin. He gave him a small glare, Dustin loved to remind him of his epic ass kicking. "Yeah, they're going to stay with me for a little bit." At least until his parents returned, he had been thinking about how he was going to initiate that conversation. His father would be deeply unhappy about it, disappointed him Steve for sticking his nose in where it didn't belong, but his father's apathy and dejection was nothing new to Steve.

“He’s not...he’s not as bad when you start to get to know him. I know it looks really weird, but it’s just something I had to do, Henderson.” Steve looked over Dustin’s face, hoping the kid understood. To leave Billy and Max in the lurch like that, regardless of whatever he and Billy were, it would make Steve a raging asshole. Nobody deserved what happened to Billy, nobody.

Dustin pressed his lips together as he thought and then huffed. “He knows Dungeons and Dragons,” he offered, as if he was trying to give a reason *to* like Billy. He shrugged and kicked his legs out further, trying to make himself seem taller. “But what the hell happened to him? Is that why him and Max are there? I mean, I’m not stupid, and it sorta explains some stuff...” Dustin trailed off and made a face.

Dustin wasn’t stupid. He could read in between the lines (normally), and if Billy *and* Max were staying there, something had happened at the house. And Billy looked wrecked, so he just assumed... “But why you? Like, he smashed your face in. Like, *really* smashed it,” Dustin nodded, “Does he just not have any friends?”

Steve didn’t even think Billy knew just how much that stupid game had opened the kids up to him. Somebody like Billy showing any sort of mutual interests as the little group of nerds meant something to them.

Steve didn’t really know how to answer Dustin’s real question. He was sure people at the school liked Billy, hell, some were enamoured with him, but there was difference between liking somebody and actually stepping up to do something for them. Steve also knew it wasn’t his place to talk about Billy’s father, he wasn’t going to break Billy’s trust like that. Billy opened that door when he asked for Steve, but that didn’t mean the door was still open for anybody else to walk in. He would have to keep Dustin in the dark on that one--it’s not like

Dustin thought (or believed it was possible) that Steve kicked Billy's ass.

He frowned in thought for a moment before he smiled at him, "Sometimes in life Henderson, some asshole comes along and asks you if you still have a bat. You get me?"

Dustin glanced over at Steve and then nodded, slowly, as if he understood. "Well... I don't think he's going to kill us anymore. I mean, he's *not* a part of the Party, or whatever, but I don't *hate* him anymore." He made another face and then crossed his arms over his chest. "You're not gonna... like, leave us to hang out with him, right? You're not gonna turn into some asshole like you used to be? Like... you know..."

Dustin was *worried* . He didn't want to lose Steve, especially if that meant he was going back to the way he had been before. He wanted Steve to stay *Steve* .

Steve was painfully aware that Billy was not a member of the Party and Steve planned to keep it that way. The last thing he wanted was Billy dealing with all that shit too. The kids knew Bob was dead, but he recalled Joyce's harsh sobs as Hopper pulled her away, "They tore him apart, Hop--they tore him *apart* !" It was something Steve thought about often, thought about what could have happened to him and this cute little shit right in front of him. Steve sighed.

"I'll be fine, man, try to be positive! Maybe he'll hang out with me and you shits so much that he becomes your little wizard or dungeon slave master or some shit." Hell, with the way Billy knew all that crap, maybe Steve should be worried Billy was going to leave his company for the little shits. "It'll be fine, okay? Now get the hell

outta my car, your mom is waiting for you.”

Dustin made a gagging noise at the idea of Billy actually joining the game, just to keep up the conversation, and then snickered. “Just, uh, y’know, don’t let him beat your face in again. Dunno if it can handle that.” He grinned, big and cheeky, before dashing out of the car (before Steve could grab him). He slammed the door shut and ran up his driveway. Before he went in, he whirled around and waved his hand excitedly. At the same time, he was making a punching motion with the other hand and a ‘noooo’ with his mouth.

Steve looked at him in disbelief and shook his head before he muttered under his breath, “Jesus Christ....” Steve started his car again and drove back home. Their secret was safe for now and Steve was going to let Billy dictate the terms of it, he owed him that much.

11. Chapter 11

Summary for the Chapter:

I hope you enjoyed that little bit of fluff and it warmed your heart, because I'm going to try to rip your heart out and I like 'em toasty. Enjoy Steve angst that made me physically ill to write.

Luckily for Max, she didn't really have that much homework that weekend, so when Billy came into the living room and rested on the couch, she pretended that she was immersed in her studies. She glanced up a few times, took him in, before she softly said, "I didn't know that you knew about any of that stuff." It felt a little sad to her, like there could have always been a real brother/sister bond and it just never happened.

Billy looked up from where he was sitting. He had his medication in one hand and a coke in the other. The pain had started to distract him, so he figured it was probably time to let himself be foggy. He popped them in his mouth and then swallowed with a swish of coke. "Not really something you boast about, Max," he replied quietly, settling the can on his thigh as he glanced at her text book.

"And I like reading, so, I know general shit," Billy glanced away and tapped his thumb against the can. It was obviously hard for him to talk like this, but he was trying, even if it wasn't too in depth. He also apparently ignored the fact that he knew *way more* than just "general shit."

Max glanced at him again, "Even still....I'm glad you joined us. It was *almost* cool of you." She was sure that Billy would never have joined had she not asked, but he did it. Billy was clearly hurt, and she knew the guys were curious since it was hard not to be. She just didn't

know where to begin, talk to them about everything she had seen, and everything that was happening. She didn't want them pitying her.

And then Billy apologized to Lucas. Max had never known what that was about, and now she felt nervous to ask, like she never really knew what Billy was thinking or what he was about. Her gaze dropped down to her homework, "Lucas told me you talked to him."

Billy snorted out a laugh at the first comment and shook his head. He took another drink and wondered if now was a good time to smoke because he was *so not okay* with talking about how he apologized. Billy was always a hard ass, always the one who never apologized, no matter what. And then there he was, muttering an apology to Lucas. He knew it was important to Max, and while he would continue to tell himself he apologized for *her*, he knew part of it was for himself (and definitely for Steve).

"Dad... *really* didn't like you hanging out with him," Billy looked down at the coke and tilted the can in a circle--not enough to spill, just enough to feel the liquid slosh. He glanced over to the sliding glass door and *really* wanted a cigarette. Shit. Neil had seen Lucas around Max once, and Billy was sure to find out later. He had a great lesson on how older brothers *protected* sisters from people like Lucas. Billy hadn't given a damn who Lucas was, but Neil had, and Billy had no intention of getting beat again, so he had gone after the kid.

Max was uncomfortable, clearly uncomfortable, as she picked at her jeans and whispered, "But you're okay with it now, right? Now that we're out of the house?" Max wanted Billy to like Lucas, after all, she liked Lucas. She wasn't sure what she would do if Billy wanted her to stop seeing him, he was a member of the party, and while Max might normally tell Billy to go screw himself, everything felt so delicate

since the incident with Neil.

She pushed her books into her bag and scooted a little closer to Billy. "I want us to be like...I want a real brother." She looked at him intently, looked at him like she wasn't sure Billy was capable of that. But then again there was fries on the beach and skateboards. And before Billy could answer her, she pressed on, in a determined tone, "And I want you to be nice to Steve, I'm not going to say anything about it, but you both like each other and I'm not stupid. I'm not stupid and I know what I've seen and if he helps you not be an asshole like right now, I want that. I want that if we're going to be a real brother and sister."

Billy licked his lips and tensed as Max shifted closer to him. He still hadn't responded to her first comment about Lucas. It was hard to express how much he hated Neil, hated waiting to be beat for things that he couldn't control, and Lucas and Max were *not* people he could control. Not easily. He had used so many tactics, and in the end, it didn't work. He commended her, though, on that. Even if it did end poorly for him (fuck Neil, seriously).

"Neil is a fucking racist shitbag, and I don't care what color Lucas happens to be," Billy shrugged and winced a little. "So, I'm okay with it..." He was okay with Max. Hell, he was okay with most things when he wasn't nervous about going home.

At the mention of Steve, Billy tensed even more. He glanced over to Max and then worked his jaw. "Yeah. Yeah, I got you. I'll be good to him." His eyes flickered down to his drink and he bit the inside of his cheek. "Gotta be nice to Steve to have you as a sister, huh? Sounds alright." It was the best 'yes' Billy could give, even if it was a roundabout way of saying it.

Max studied his face before she knelt up on the couch and crawled over a little. She gingerly hugged Billy around his shoulders, as if they made a pact together, and maybe they had. She hadn't really hugged or touched Billy without one of them feeling broken at the moment, so it felt strange, but not something she couldn't get used to.

The lights of Steve's car flickered in the window, signaling he had made it back home. Max pulled back slowly, looked at Billy again, before she sat down beside him and opened her book back up. The front door open and closed quietly, Max and Billy both heard the soft klink of Steve's keys set on the table there, Steve's shoes hitting the ground in the small pile by the front, and his footsteps before he entered the living room. Steve smiled at them both a little, "Max, you need to get ready for bed."

Billy's hands clenched at first and then he gently patted his hand on Max's shoulder. His gaze flitted away, to the backyard, and then back to Max. When she pulled away, he relaxed and blew out a small breath. It would take him a while to get used to affection, but eventually, he hoped he could just... be okay with it. He glanced toward the front of the house and his lips quirked when he saw Steve.

"Babysitter is home," Billy drawled, "Better watch out, Max. He may have stricter bed times than Susan." He huffed and leaned back against the couch. He did have a decision to make: should he go to school the following day, looking like this? Probably not--not until at least some of the bruising healed. With his reputation, *not* showing up was more dangerous. He brought his thumb to his nail and chewed on his nail.

Steve rolled his eyes and entered the living room, stood before the both of them. "Yeah, ha ha, hilarious, move it Max, let's go."

She rolled her eyes and retorted, "You just wanna make out or something. Whatever." Steve's eyes widened for a moment before she laughed loudly at getting Steve. She snatched her bag, bounded out the room, and they could hear her running up the stairs.

Steve exhaled loudly and flopped down on the couch, suddenly feeling exhausted and seriously questioning whether or not Billy and Max were related by blood. Steve wasn't sure how long he could take being tag-teamed with jabs from both the Hargroves.

Billy burst out laughing at Max's response and tried to stop, but the laughter continued as Max ran up the stairs. When he finally quieted himself, he looked over at Steve and grinned. He shifted, then, and slung a leg over Steve's lap. He pressed his thigh against Steve's stomach and shook his head.

"You look beat, Harrington," Billy mused, reaching out to push some of his hair, which was a fucking mess, out of his face. "And I--I didn't tell her. She's smart. Doesn't miss much."

"Yeah well, running around after the little shits all day is exhausting, Hargrove. And I mean...well, I figured she kinda knew or might soon." Steve smiled softly as Billy reached out to touch his hair, his hand gently rested on Billy's leg. "I don't mind," Steve murmured, "I don't think she'll put it on the loudspeaker at her school or anything. ...Do you mind?"

Steve looked him over, Billy also looked tired, but relaxed. He must have taken his medication, once again without Steve's prompting really.

"Max is smart enough not to blab," Billy shrugged and it didn't hurt, so he figured the medication was working. He looked over Steve quietly for a moment and then shook his head. "Shit... you ever think sometimes, like, how the fuck did you end like this? Like. What fucking happened in the universe to make *one* thing go right in everything that is so fucked up?"

Billy wasn't sure he was making sense, but he didn't care. Nothing ever went right for him, so to be sprawled on the couch with Steve Harrington was just... mind-blowing. Or, well, it could be the drugs, but those just tore down his walls, so this was a part of him, right? This awe that he had for Steve? It had to be him.

Steve looked at Billy in surprise, part of him wasn't sure if Billy was talking about Max, getting away from his father, him, or maybe a combination of everything. It had all happened so fast really, insanely fast, and neither one of them had a moment to catch their breath and process everything. But if Billy was happy...then Steve was too. Billy deserved happiness.

Steve smiled and took his hand gently, mumbled, "You're being stupid, Hargrove, sometimes things just happen." Not that Steve really believed that, couldn't believe that. No, Steve felt that so much of his life, especially recently, was supposed to happen. All of these small moments, but they would mean a lot in the grand scheme of his life. Meeting Nancy, going back into the Byers' house that first night, Dustin finding him at the Wheelers', his fight with Billy--all of it changed everything forever.

Steve taking his hand made Billy pause. He glanced at him again and then tilted his head so it rest against the couch. "I dunno, Harrington. Dad moved me out here so I *couldn't* be a fag. Then, like a fucking idiot, I take out all my rage on the hottest guy in Hawkins. Somehow, despite that shit, I end up in the guy's bed, and then he somehow *gets me out of that house* ." Billy reached up and rubbed his eyes gently, knowing that even with medicine, that would hurt.

"You did...have done way more than any other guy I've been with. Shit, as soon as my dad came around, they hightailed it," Billy chuckled and shook his head. "You're some shit, Harrington."

Steve swallowed hard as he watched Billy, felt his stomach twist in knots as Billy spoke. He wasn't really sure what to say, and Steve knew it was hard for Billy to express himself like that. Hell, it was hard for Steve to even hear it. When Billy was raw, it was just so much for him to actually handle. He wanted to disagree with Billy, to somehow make a joke, but it wasn't the right moment, so instead Steve slowly tightened his grip on Billy's hand.

His heart quickened a little as he took Billy in. It made Steve so nervous, so nervous for what the hell they were doing, but also made him want so much more. Billy made him feel better about himself, better than he had in a long time. King Steve was bullshit, maybe some malicious fun for Steve at the time, but he didn't really feel *good* when he was King Steve. Steve felt really uncomfortable with Billy placing him on this pedestal, like Dustin said, what if he reverted back to just being an asshole? Steve didn't really think that Billy's adoration was deserved. 'I'm sure I'll find a way to disappoint you somehow.'

Steve laughed quietly, tried to quell the butterflies in his stomach. "Don't worry, Hargrove, I'm sure I'll be the shittiest lay you've ever had." And Steve winced a little and looked away, immediately regretted it, hated how stupid he sounded, hated to admit he would sleep with Billy, hated how goddamn needy and pathetic he sounded when Billy was pouring his heart out. Steve was just sure this was going to be moment for Billy. A nice moment, but a moment, before Steve became boring.

Billy glanced over to Steve, his gaze sharp and almost predatory as he took him in. It was weird to feel anger again, but it began to simmer in his blood, reaching into his fingertips and curling them. He reached out with his free hand and took Steve's jaw in his hand. It was a little harder than he wanted, his hold a bit fierce, but he forced Steve to look at him. "You aren't just a fucking lay, Steve. What the fuck do you think I'm doing here? Chilling? Just fucking riding the waves? Christ."

Once Billy swung his leg off Steve, he pushed himself up off the couch. He grabbed his lighter and cigarettes from the living room table and wobbled to the sliding glass door. "If you think you're just a fucking lay, Harrington, fuck. You." He opened the door and then closed it. Then, with a fucking curse, he realized he had just gone back on his word with Max. He clenched his hand around his lighter and made his way to one of the lounge chairs.

Of course, Billy didn't even realize that his outburst basically said that Steve was *important* to him. That this meant something. That Billy saw beyond just what Steve was offering physically. It didn't even click. He sat, instead, panicking over the fact that he had probably hurt Steve and that Max was going to be pissed and *fuck*, he may have fucked up again.

Steve's eyes widened at Billy's angry outburst and he winced when he heard the door close. He sat there for several moments with his head tilted down. It wasn't what he meant, not really, and Steve knew that he fucked up. It implied that Billy was shallow, and that wasn't what Steve meant to do. It was Steve's own issues. Steve chewed his lower lip and strained to hear any noise from outside.

It was night and despite everything that happened between them, he still didn't feel comfortable leaving Billy out there by himself. Rather than deal with another goddam panic attack, Steve swallowed his pride and got up. He silently padded to the door and went outside. Steve could see Billy sitting on one of the lounge chairs and he reluctantly made his way over.

Billy wasn't smoking yet, which surprised Steve, but he walked to him and sat down carefully on the edge of Billy's chair, Steve's back to Billy. He didn't fail to notice that he was the one closer to the pool at the moment. Steve's voice were soft, careful, "That's not what I meant. I meant..." Jesus Christ, Steve sighed. "I meant what I *am* , not what you think of this, of us. I mean that I'm not..." Not what? King Steve? Didn't like boys? Interesting enough to hold Billy's attention for very long?

"Fuck, I don't know what I mean," Steve muttered. He turned slightly to take a cigarette, kept his gaze down, and gently plucked the lighter from Billy's hand before he lit it and inhaled deeply. He didn't normally do that, he normally fucked around, barely inhaling in a social setting until the cigarette was gone. Steve made a small noise in the back of his throat, but he relished the painful burn for just a moment.

Billy tensed as he heard Steve come out. He was waiting to be yelled at, to have some sort of repercussion for his outburst. When he didn't,

his body began to shake. It's what always happened. Whenever he expected a beating from his dad, his entire body would go taut. As soon as it didn't happen, he'd be trembling and then tensing, waiting, again. It drove him nuts, but after so long, it became habitual--ingrained. He stared at the ground as Steve took a cigarette and didn't bother protesting when their hands brushed as he took his lighter.

"Not what?" Billy remembered saying fag, and he winced. "I know you're not a fag. If that's what you're saying. So..." Billy shrugged and glanced over. He was glad Steve's back was facing him, so he could at least look at him without feeling so panicked. "If you don't want this, just tell me. Stop... stop making it seem okay. Just tell me. I just don't... I don't know what you want."

And didn't that fucking suck? Billy rubbed a hand over his face, not even caring that it hurt. Maybe he'd go to school tomorrow just for the fun of it. Just to feel like himself, even if people berated him with questions.

Steve shook his head and groaned, that wasn't what he meant at all, and certainly not what he wanted. He was just fucking this up even more. Steve put his head in his hands a moment and tried to collect his thoughts. The cigarette burned absently in his hand. "No, I like--I mean, I don't fucking know what I am, but I like what we're doing. I *really, really* fucking like it, probably way too much, so don't--"

Steve stopped talking for a moment as he listened to the quiet sounds of the night, wind rustling, crickets, the pool. Steve took another drag on the cigarette. When he coughed a little, he didn't hear Billy mock him for it. "I don't wanna stop. That's not what I mean either. I mean...." It was quiet again before Steve turned in the chair to face Billy.

His voice wavered slightly, but he spoke fairly confidently, "I'm not going to make you happy. I'm boring and you're going to end this, whatever this is, I'm not going to be.... *enough* , at the end, that's....that's what I mean. Right now it's....but I'm going to fuck this up. You have *seen* me, like really *seen* me, and that's not going to just--" Steve groaned again, "Does that make sense? It's not you, Hargrove, ok? It's not you." As if he was proving his own point, Steve felt uncomfortable with his back to the pool and he turned again and let out a derisive snort. Steve took one last drag before he flicked the cigarette into the pool.

Billy clenched his jaw in frustration, but he didn't move. He didn't even light up. He didn't bother. The anger boiling in him couldn't be controlled or eased with a cigarette because the anger *hurt* . He was used to being pissed. He was used to hating people. He wasn't used to being angry *and* hurting so deep in his chest that it felt like it was suffocating him. He refused to meet Steve's eye when he turned around and continued to stare off to the side until Steve turned back to the pool.

"I'm glad you can make decisions for me, Steve," Billy's response was rough. His eyes stung as he pushed up from the chair. He dropped his cigarettes next to Steve since the guy still had the lighter. "The classic 'it's not you, it's me' bullshit. That's great. Because I saw you at your worst, I suddenly can't handle you at your most boring? You've--you've seen me--" Billy trailed off and reached up to brush off his cheeks. "Y'know. Steve. Fuck this. Go decide shit for yourself. But don't make decisions for me. My dad did enough of that shit."

Billy walked toward the house, but instead of actually going in, he veered around the side, making his way toward the front. He didn't even want to be in the house. Everyone-- *fucking everyone* tried to control him.

Steve's eyes went wide as he watched Billy and he felt this grave horror in the pit of his stomach when Billy stalked away from him. His body went numb for just a few seconds before he was quickly up and ran after him. Steve called out, "Billy, Billy, wait--just let me--*please* --!"

Steve ran in front of Billy and put both his hands up, breathing harder, dimly aware that grabbing or trying to physically stop Billy was probably a really shitty idea and if the guy punched his lights out, he wouldn't really blame him.

"Just let me--!" Steve closed his eyes quickly a moment and he struggled to think, he couldn't tell Billy everything, couldn't place him in danger like that. Shit they could be watching them right now for all Steve knew. Steve exhaled hard with his eyes closed, his breath shaking as he did his best to calm the panic that was clawing up inside him. "Six. I have....six of those bats." It wasn't something he told a soul before, not even Nancy. That deep mania that took hold of him when he made them, the only bit of reassurance he had at all when he thought of that *thing* swinging at him.

Billy stopped when Steve ran in front of him, but the anger that had been boiling had sort of...fallen off. He felt empty now, completely vacant of emotions as his skin crawled. His heart was still pounding in his chest, but it felt distant, out-of-body, and as he watched Steve try to compose himself, he couldn't actually gather any sort of emotions to respond. To think. He stared at Steve, instead, unbearably fucking broken because Billy had *trusted* Steve not to control him, not to do this to him, not to be *his fucking dad* .

"That's fantastic. You'll be able to defend yourself pretty well against

whatever the fuck you're so terrified of. What would I know, though, right? I'm just some white trash kid whose dad likes to beat on him. Get out of my way, Harrington," Billy clenched his hands. If Steve didn't fucking move, he'd move him himself. He'd shove him to the ground and not give a flying fuck. Yet, who was he kidding? For some reason (he knew why--he wasn't going to lie to himself, or perhaps he was), he wouldn't touch Steve like that again.

"Move. Harrington." Billy leveled his eyes on Steve, but he didn't look him in the eye. Instead, he stared at his mouth, his nose, his cheek. The same thing he did with his dad when he knew that looking him in the eye was a bad idea. "Just. *Please* move."

Steve stared at him in disbelief, the blood rushing in his ears and he didn't even stop himself from letting out a scream. It was born of frustration and pain, he was fucking this up and he just couldn't explain, couldn't fix this, and it was just proving his point. If Steve had been thinking rationally, he might have worried a neighbor would hear him.

"THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU ARE TO ME!" Steve yelled again as he tore his hands through his hair and clenched hard, "FUCK!"

His vision swam for a moment and he fought it, fought the wave of nausea rising up inside him as his stomach clenched. Steve laughed then, and it was harsh and bitter, more bitter than the cigarette that filled his lungs earlier. "You, *YOU* , think that's the fucking worst! You don't know the fucking worst! I'm losing my goddamn mind! I can't fucking have you sit outside without thinking you're gonna get fucking torn apart! I can't fucking stop watching the kids because I can't stop thinking they're gonna fucking get killed and I'd rather it be me!" Steve started pacing just a little, swaying ever so slightly with the emotions overwhelming him.

“I don’t--I don’t sleep!” Steve laughed again, “I haven’t had a real good night’s sleep in months! Sometimes I fucking drink, like *really* fucking drink just so I can fucking not dream about anything! The first goddamn night I’ve been able to sleep was when you were with me, you asshole! So no-NO! I’m not going to fucking move! *Fucking hit me* and make it hard enough so that I can get some goddamn sleep, because if you’re not going to be there, it’s the only way it’s gonna happen!”

Steve stopped, panting harshly and his eyes widened for a moment as his body shook hard and he stumbled for a moment as his heart raced and blood pumped hard inside him. “She was *torn apart* -she was torn-and Bob too--you don’t know--” Steve stumbled again as he tried to regain control over his body, he had so much to say to Billy. Tell him everything, because if Billy told him, Steve told him back, right? But right then he couldn’t get out the words, couldn’t *breathe* --

Billy actually took a step *back* from Steve, that inkling of panic, of seeing panic, seeing Steve in so much turmoil making his stomach turn. He parted his lips to say something, but each time he did, Steve continued on in his shouting. Billy glanced off to the side, toward the neighbor’s house, and swallowed. Shit. They were going to cause a scene. His eyes were pulled back to Steve and he could tell that he was in the throes of a panic attack.

“Steve,” Billy breathed, and he tried so fucking hard to just *feel* , but his emotions had fallen into a fucking box, and that box had tumbled into the back of his head. It had been a long time since his brain had locked away things to keep him safe, and for once, Billy didn’t appreciate it (maybe he did because seeing Steve like this was probably tearing him apart, even if he couldn’t feel it).

“Hey,” Billy *did* want to punch Steve. It was in his nature to throw a fist, but he couldn’t. Steve had *asked* for it and Billy *couldn’t* . He stepped into Steve’s space, instead, and tentatively reached down, where Steve was bent, to run his fingers over his cheeks and into his hair. He settled one hand in the strands, stroking along them while his other hand found the top of his back. He put pressure there, forcing Steve to move forward so Billy could wrap that arm around him.

“Shit. Okay, okay, Steve, I get it,” Billy didn’t get it. He didn’t get anything that was going on, and it was *suffocating* . But he’d say it for Steve’s sake. He would say it and pretend like he understood. Even if the comment about him *not knowing the worst* cut deeply, even if Steve refusing to talk to him about specifics did the same thing. Billy ran his fingers down Steve’s back, along his spine, his own heart thundering as he tried to calm him down.

Max’s words rang in his ears and Billy closed his eyes for a moment. Despite being out of his dad’s house, he felt as if he didn’t have any choice. Max wanted to be close to him, but the stipulation was being kind to Steve. He couldn’t get shit out of the guy about what happened, so he became frustrated, and it would probably be put on him again for fucking up. But it always was, and Billy supposed it wasn’t much different than before. This time, he just didn’t have to worry about being beaten for it.

“Breathe for me, babe,” Billy murmured, his tone so much damned softer than it was earlier, “I’m going to be there. I’ll be there with you. Just breathe, yeah?” And Billy was sorry. *Again* . He was sorry that he didn’t get it, that he didn’t understand, that Steve wouldn’t tell him shit. But he kept his mouth shut as he held Steve with one arm and slid his fingers through his hair with the other hand.

When Billy came into his space, Steve grasped onto him tightly. He felt like he was shaking from the inside out and his breathing was harsh and ragged, he woke up like this, he wasn't *awake* like this! Steve's vision dimmed and his head dropped into Billy's shoulder, his face pressed into his neck. The fact that he was in such deep panic attack scared the shit out of him. If he was hidden in his house, in his room, nobody had to know but him. Steve dug his fingers into Billy's shirt, his legs felt weak like he was going to drop, like the bottom already dropped out of him. Steve knew then it was only a matter of time—he was going to fuck up, they were all going to see, they were all going to *know* because he couldn't keep his shit together.

Steve sobbed softly, with the pain rising deep up from inside him as tears slid down his face onto Billy's neck. "They're all going to kill us, they're all going to—you, you think it's you, but it's me, it's *me* ! You are *so much more* than anybody thinks, but I'm just—it's all gonna be my *fault* -!" Steve didn't even know what he was saying, not really, he wanted Billy to understand, he wanted to make him understand that maybe Steve could get him out of the house, maybe Billy would fuck Steve, maybe they'd even be nice *together* , but it wasn't Billy that was broken, it was *him*.

Steve shook so hard, his teeth chattered as he struggled to pull himself out of this, they could be watching them right now, they watched Nancy and Jonathan. Nancy and Jonathan—so smug that the world knew something about Barb, but those people weren't going to just *stop*. No, it was going to be worse now. People who kidnapped and tortured little girls to turn them into science experiments didn't just *stop* .

In the end, it was breathing in Billy that calmed Steve down. The warmth of Billy's skin, the feel of his fingers in Steve's hair, and all Steve could think was just how amazing Billy Hargrove didn't even realize he was. Steve couldn't stop the shaking though and he closed his eyes, tried to gather the scattered thoughts all along there. *It likes*

the cold . Steve felt hollow, like the inside of him was carved out and there was just nothing left when he harshly whispered, “I need a shower.”

Billy wanted to ask who “they” were, but he knew better. He knew that prying would only set Steve off more, if not push him away entirely. Instead, with his own limbs sort of numb, he squeezed Steve closer to his body and pressed his lips to his temple. He stared over his head, though, into the night, as his thoughts continued to run rampant over who, exactly, Steve was talking about. Killing, murder, they--it sounded like a fucking conspiracy theory, but what was Billy going to do about it? Probably nothing, since Steve wouldn't actually tell him anything.

Steve's claim that he was 'so much more' pulled him from his thoughts. He looked down at him and bit his lower lip. That was so undeniably untrue. Billy wasn't going to say anything, though, because once again--it may just push Steve over that edge.

It wasn't until Steve mentioned needing a shower that Billy seemed to shake himself out of whatever trance he was in. His eyes flickered down and his lungs stuttered as he took how wrecked Steve looked in.

“Alright. Anything you want,” Billy kept his voice low. He wasn't even sure Steve could walk. He had thought the guy was going to pass out on him for a second (fucking panic attacks), but was glad when he didn't. Billy could lift, but he probably couldn't handle Steve right now. Finally, Billy shifted so he could loop an arm around Steve's waist. He began to walk them both to the back again, toward the sliding door.

“Ya mind if I smoke? I’ll just do half and come in.” Billy automatically assumed that Steve didn’t want him in the bathroom with him. He just... didn’t feel like he was welcomed at the moment.

Steve just shook his head, not really confirming one way or another, as they both made their way inside. Steve was silent, his head down, and he just felt too overwhelmed to speak. If he kept talking, he was just going to make this even worse. Billy had *asked* for him after his father beat him, but Steve had dragged Billy into his shit--was still dragging him into his shit--and he just needed to stop. He just wanted all of it to stop.

Steve didn’t turn to head into the downstairs bathroom, instead he grabbed the staircase bannister and began to slowly make his way upstairs. Billy was warm and comforting beside him, Steve could feel Billy looking at him, but Steve couldn’t look at him right then. If he did, he would break and Billy would know everything.

It was painfully quiet in the room, and Steve missed Max’s head poke out of his own room. Her eyes were red, like she had been crying, and she briefly made eye contact with Billy before she silently ducked back inside.

Steve opened the bathroom door and stepped inside, he didn’t close the door. He was numb and exhausted and he just wanted to feel something again. He reached out and turned only the hot water on. He lifted the plug for the shower and it fritzed for one moment before the heavy spray of water was the only thing Steve could hear. He leaned against the vanity and wordlessly tugged off his clothes, uncaring if Billy was there or watching him before he just stepped inside and closed the tinted shower door.

Billy helped Steve to the bathroom, but he stayed back when Steve finally climbed in. He even averted his eyes when the guy got undressed because he felt like shit all over again. When he heard the shower running, he eased out of the bathroom and walked down the stairs. His body felt stiff again, and he knew it was too soon to take more pain medication, but he was fucking tempted. Who the fuck cared, anyway? Being a little high on pills wasn't going to kill him.

Instead of going for the pills, though, Billy eased outside and grabbed his cigarettes and his lighter. He wouldn't smoke inside. He knew better than that. However, he stood far from the pool and turned on the porch light so that, if Steve wanted to know what he was doing, he could look and he wouldn't be so freaked out. He flipped his lighter open and lit his cigarette.

When the smoke filled his lungs, it burned in just the right way. He held it in for a few moments, and then let it seep from his nose. He squinted at the pool. The girl died here. Six bats. *They*. Some shit was going down and he wondered if it had to do with the night that he tried to take Max home. All the kids were at that creepy ass house. Harrington had been protective as fuck, and suddenly Billy was drugged up and Steve was beat to hell.

When Billy took the cigarette from his lips, his hands were shaking. He breathed in slowly and closed his eyes. He was fucking up, and he had no idea how to fix it.

Max stayed in Steve's room until she couldn't hear them speaking anymore, all she could hear was the sound of the shower across the hall. She shook a little as she sat on Steve's bed, stared at the wall, stared at the lights. She remembered Lucas' warning: that's how you knew it was coming. Max plugged in the lights and their soft, warm light filled the room, steady and non-flickering.

She swiped at her face, her cheeks warm as she poked her head out of the bedroom. She heard most of what was said, at least what Steve screamed at Billy before he collapsed against Billy. Max couldn't see Billy anywhere and she remembered standing in that bus, looking up at the emergency hatch, and that *thing* opened its face at her-- and she knew it would eat her if it could--and Steve shoved her away and screamed at it, threatened it, and she was safe.

The party would be mad at her, really mad. It wasn't her place, she knew that deep down. Max might be the newest member, but they trusted her. She really wasn't sure if they would kick her out if they discovered what she was about to do, what she resolved to do, as she went downstairs. Max saw the porch light on through the kitchen and headed there. Billy's back was to her, smoking.

She didn't fully understand their feelings for each other, but sometimes when she thought about Lucas, she wondered if that was what it was like, this sort of pleasant sickness that made her smile. She wasn't going to let Billy fuck this up. She wasn't going to let Steve push Billy away. Not for this. She opened the sliding glass door and stepped outside, looked up at Billy when she demanded, "What are you doing?"

Billy took a heavy drag of his cigarette as Max stepped outside. Here it is. He tipped his head back to look at the stars and waited for a few moments to respond. Hell, the lack of response, the anger, made him more exhausted than anything else. He rubbed his eyes and glanced down at Max.

"Fuckin' up," Billy laughed, but it was hollow. He ran his fingers through his hair and grinned. "Fuckin' up, Max. Like always. Because

I don't know how the fuck relationships work because I'm *fucked up* . Why? You wanna know more? Or is this it? I hurt Steve again and suddenly, we're back to where we started, yeah?"

Billy held his fingers a little too close to the burning edge of his cigarette, and he didn't mind the pain blossoming there. He finally shifted it away, though, and took another drag. His eyes had flickered to the pool.

"Seriously, Max. What did you expect? It's not like I'm a decent person or some shit."

Max wanted to hit him, wanted to shove him hard to make Billy just stop talking, make him get it together. She glared hotly as she looked up at him and then ground out, "Stop it, just stop it."

She looked once back in the direction of the house, they were both too far away to hear anything going on inside, but she suspected that Steve might still be in the shower. She could hear Dustin's voice in awe, 'He's awesome.'

Max sighed, they wouldn't forgive her, for sure. She looked up at Billy intently, and no matter what happened between them, Billy deserved happiness. She could feel that in her bones, that maybe, just maybe this could help Billy. And if the Party rejected her...maybe it would make up for all the times that she didn't see what Neil was doing to Billy.

"Steve's not crazy. He's not crazy and....and what he's talking about is the reason why I was at the Byers' that night. He's *not* crazy and I

can prove it, just--just not right now.” Max looked imploringly up at Billy, begged for his trust, begged for him to get back in there and make things right.

Billy glanced down at Max again and then dropped his cigarette. He didn't bother pressing it out. He didn't have damned shoes on. He'd just let it burn (concrete wouldn't be harmed by a cigarette, anyway). On second thought, Billy pressed his heel into the burning end. He didn't even cringe when his skin burned.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever, Max. Whenever you wanna show me this proof, let me know.” Billy let the pain roll through his body as he turned to Max and gestured. “Now get inside and go to bed, otherwise I'll hear it from Harrington. Fuck knows he has enough reason to yell at me already.”

At this point, Billy had become numb to the entire situation. He was so fucking *done* with everything. His dad, the feeling of helplessness, trying to figure out what to do for Max. He was seventeen and felt like a fifty year old.

But then Max shoved him then. She didn't shove him hard enough to hurt him, or even push Billy back very far. She wasn't strong enough for that, not even close. She looked up at him, her eyes watered and her voice cracked a little, “I'm not lying! I can show you--I will show you! Stop it!”

She shoved Billy again but this time, her small hands fisted in his shirt. “I know all about it, I know--I know about the bat! I know about the lights! I know about that girl who died here, Barbara! And I know about the dogs, I've *seen* them Billy! I'm not lying!” Tears rolled down her cheeks as her face flushed.

Of course she would know about the bat, she had seen it at the house. And maybe the lights too, she was staying with Billy in Steve's house. But Steve only told Billy about that girl, Steve hadn't been alone with Max long enough to tell her that story.

She sniffled and tightened her grip as she held onto him, "Please don't do this, I promise I'll show you. I promise it's real and I can prove it."

12. Chapter 12

Summary for the Chapter:

Well, I promised fluff, angst, and smut. So happy holidays fellow perverts! If I get sent to Hell for posting this on Christmas, I'm gonna say it was worth it.

Billy winced when he was pushed--not because it was hard, but because he was in enough pain already for it to actually hurt. He didn't raise his hands, though, didn't bother to actually stand his ground as she pushed him again. He faltered and then sighed. Honestly, what the fuck had his life become?

"I'm not... doubting you Max. Jesus." Billy hesitated and then settled a hand on top of her head. He stared at the pool for a long moment before shifting his feet. He may or may not be regretting the decision to put the cigarette out with his heel. "We'll go, okay? Just. Calm down." Christ. Two in one night was too much for him. One was too much.

"Just... we'll go, okay? When we get a chance, and Steve isn't up in my shit, we'll go." Billy ran his fingers over her scalp and then let his hand drop to his side. "Just go inside and get to bed. I need to go look after him, okay?"

Billy fucking Hargrove--number one fuck up. He chuckled at that and reached over to slide the door open.

Max looked up at him again, as if she didn't believe him. She swiped at her face quickly, she hated crying and hated other people seeing her cry, but Billy was her brother and he wasn't going to believe her unless she was serious. Her lower lip quivered a little, "I mean it, Billy. I'm going to show you. So stop screwing up."

She was quiet again for a moment, stood there awkwardly before she gingerly leaned in and gently hugged him around Billy's waist, pressed her head against him. It was a lot, she knew that, but she needed Billy to believe her. "Good night," she mumbled into his skin

before she turned and went back up the stairs. Max went directly into her room and passed the bathroom, she heard the water still running. She closed the door softly and stood in her room before she turned on the small light beside the bed. It didn't flicker. Max climbed into the large bed, determined that she had done the right thing.

Billy snorted at the last comment and looked around the backyard. Stop screwing up, huh? He chewed on the inside of his cheek and then followed Max inside. After sliding and locking the door, he made his way upstairs and to the bathroom. Every other step hurt, a flash of pain running through his leg, but it grounded him (pain always did).

As he slid the bathroom door open, his heart jumped a little. He liked Steve. Hell, he may like him more than that, but that terrified him, too. He didn't like the idea that he could feel so horrible about doing or saying something to someone. Steve made everything so fucking real. He ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it back for a moment before glancing at the shower.

"Steve..? Y'okay?"

It was quiet for several long moments, but Steve was unmistakably inside, Billy could see him. The easiest thing to believe was that Steve was just crazy. But there was something that made Steve like this. That dead girl was real, and maybe she died here too, but that wasn't it. It was more than Steve let on, more than he had properly articulated, more of whatever it was that gave Steve crippling nightmares and panic attacks that left him barely able to breathe.

Steve's voice finally croaked out, "Yeah. I'm okay. ...I'm sorry, Billy." Steve wasn't sure what else he could really say. The water was hot, really fucking hot, and even though he knew it hurt him at first, he was just glad he could stand it. His skin was a dark pink and he just let the water run over his body, soaked it up. It didn't like to be cold, so Steve was safe there in the shower.

But then there was Billy and Steve just kept fucking it up, couldn't keep his mouth shut, and then couldn't stop himself from sticking his foot in his mouth. Steve hadn't lied to Billy, he wanted this—whatever was happening between them, he wanted it. He just didn't

know how to stop himself from fucking it up. "I'm sorry," Steve repeated, his voice much softer now.

Billy still didn't make a move toward the showers. Instead, he sort of hobbled (seriously, what the *fuck* was he thinking?) over to the toilet and sat down on the seat. He leaned back and closed his eyes. The apology was nice--he guessed--even though he was sure that he didn't deserve it. He tapped his foot against the ground, the good foot, and glanced at the shower glass.

"Yeah. Me, too," Billy shifted in his seat and frowned. "I didn't mean...to give you a panic attack, Steve. That wasn't--I really didn't mean to." It was easier to talk to glass, he found out. Not having those big doe eyes on him definitely helped. "I don't know what happened, I won't pretend to know. But... you deserve... better than that, I guess, is what I'm saying."

Steve was quiet again as he took in Billy's words, he could hear him move around in the bathroom, and some small part of him was really surprised Billy wasn't running for the hills right now. It seemed like it would be the smartest thing to do, so why wasn't Billy doing that?

"I....it wasn't you, okay? Don't think that, it happens--" Steve stopped himself, Billy knew what he would say anyway. Steve sighed softly, "That could have happened even if you and Max weren't here." Steve knew he sounded weary, he felt drained, like he had nothing left in him to fight. He rested his forehead against the tile. It was really cool, despite the heat of the water. "I also..." Steve closed his eyes, just trying to find some strength left inside him somewhere, "I don't want to end this. With you. I know I've never been with a guy before, but I know what I feel when we're together and I don't want that to stop."

Billy ran his lower lip through his teeth, gnawing on it for a moment before looking at the glass door again. "Careful, Harrington. You might make me think there's something more than just this," he was teasing, although it was a little empty. Billy never had *more*, much less anything. He just didn't want Steve to sound so...lost, so gone--far away from him. He curled his fingers into his jeans and shifted his feet.

“Do... do you mind if I join you? I don't have to--I just...” *I miss you. I miss your hands. I miss your eyes. I miss you, you stupid fucking asshole .* Billy closed his eyes and wanted to scrub his face, but knew better. Touching his face was a no-go, even if it was so tempting to press his hands against his eyes.

Steve wanted to ask him Billy: isn't there? Isn't there more than just this? Billy's words easily came back to him, 'You aren't just a fucking lay, Steve.' But the words died in his mouth when Billy hesitantly asked to join him.

Steve's eyes widened a moment before he felt his eyes water. He closed them tightly and took in a shuddering breath. Steve nodded before he remembered that Billy couldn't see him, “Yeah, I....I want you here.” Steve swallowed hard and reached out, quietly slid open the shower door about three inches. It wasn't enough for him to see Billy, he didn't know if he could look at him right now.

Billy stood from the toilet and eased his shirt over his head. His pants were off next, although it took him a moment of steadying before he could pull them off. One day he may not wear such tight jeans. One day. He glanced over and hesitated. Shit. He knew this was probably a bad idea, but he wanted to be with Steve, even if it was just under the shower. He wasn't even sure if Steve wanted him in his bed that night.

Swallowing the thought that he may have fucked this up beyond comprehension, Billy slipped the door open just enough for him to slide through. He stood behind Steve, and it was only seconds before he wrapped his arms around his body and pulled him close. The shower was fucking *hot* , almost burning, and Billy had to bite down the *what the fuck, Harrington* on his tongue. Instead, he held him, his own body beginning to tremble.

“Sorry,” Billy murmured. “I really... I'm sorry.”

It was easier to not look at Billy when he climbed into the shower. Steve didn't want to break again, didn't want Billy to see him break again, but when Billy wrapped his arms around Steve, his breath caught and Steve stilled. There was this warmth spreading over him, not from the shower, but because Billy made him feel *whole* .

Steve started to cry again, his body shaking, and he was sure Billy's was too. He felt Billy tense behind him, like Billy had fucked up but Steve shook his head and turned in the shower to face him. Steve's hand gently slid over Billy's jaw to the nape of his neck. Steve laughed softly as a few tears ran down his cheeks. Normally he would feel humiliated, but right now he was too bone weary to care.

Steve smiled as he rested his forehead against Billy's, his other hand rested against Billy's bruised chest, purpled with Neil's rage. "I guess we're both pretty fucked up, huh?" Steve chuckled, as if it was some great big cosmic joke, and maybe it was. He remembered Billy asking this same sort of question on the couch, when things went just right in the universe for some strange fucking reason.

Billy had held his breath as Steve turned around, ready to be told to get out, to get the fuck out, but as Steve's hand ventured over him, his taut muscles relaxed. He glanced over Steve's face, taking him in. He looked so damned drained, so exhausted, and Billy wish he could take it all away. Whatever "it" was. He turned his face just enough to press his lips into Steve's palm. His eyelids fluttered half-way shut and he sighed against him.

"I'm willing to be fucked up with you," Billy commented. It was so automatic, so *true*, that the honesty and realization of what it *meant* had Billy tensing. He glanced at Steve, apprehensive of his response. He didn't move, though, his hands still on Steve. And maybe, just maybe, his fingers had dug in a little when he said it.

Steve looked him over, watched Billy go through numerous expressions all at once, like he normally did. They couldn't say that, that was not...neither one of them was ready for that. As much as they both wanted to run into this, running away always seemed like a good option too.

Steve's voice was a little thicker with emotion then, but he still smiled as his fingers tangled in Billy's hair. "You...wouldn't be just a lay to me either, Hargrove. You know that, right?" Steve knew he couldn't just tell Billy everything, but for once he wasn't being selfish, not like he'd been with Nancy. He didn't want to see Billy hurt, didn't want to see him dragged into this same shit.

Billy's eyes closed all the way when Steve spoke. He kept his lips against his palm, kept still, even as his eyes stung and a few tears slipped down his cheeks. His stomach clenched and the muscle in his jaw ticked. He breathed slowly through his nose, quiet, letting what Steve said sort of soak into his skin, into his blood, and like a fucking key, it unlocked that box of emotions and they flooded back.

The tears began to drip faster as Billy tried so fucking hard to just stay still. To not look at Steve. To keep himself quiet as he was forced to part his lips to suck in oxygen because his lungs started to *burn* . He didn't say anything, though, and when he finally opened his eyes, glassy and swimming with relief, he stared at the wall.

Steve watched Billy and allowed him to have this moment, even though he never stopped touched him. Billy had been there for him and he would be there for Billy, that was all there was to it. When Billy was collected, Steve leaned forward and gently wrapped his arms around his shoulders. He pressed soft kisses over Billy's face, mindful of the bruises there. Steve wouldn't be able to thank him for staying, because he didn't have a clue as to why he actually did. But Billy would understand this.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." Steve whispered, "But it's not going to be that way...." Steve kissed him slowly, sucked on Billy's lower lip for a moment as his hand gently pressed on Billy's back, felt his strength there. "One day, I can..." Steve swallowed, he shouldn't make promises that he couldn't keep, he knew that. He searched Billy's face, "But I don't want to stop, I promise."

Billy sucked in a breath as Steve's arms moved over his shoulders. He finally looked at Steve, glancing over his face, into his eyes. He looked away almost immediately when Steve started to apologize, still awful at feelings and emotional shit. But he nodded, nonetheless, and then Steve was kissing him and he was *lost* .

Throughout the years, Billy never had a true distraction. Fighting, booze, and fucking were all great. They pushed most things to the back of his mind, but that shit was always chewing at him. Yet, when Steve's lips moved over his, it was like his problems dropped off the edge of a cliff, and Billy didn't jump after them. Instead, he returned the kiss hungrily, slipping his tongue over Steve's lower lip and then

gently tugging at him with his teeth. He let himself breathe Steve in, to taste him and just linger in the moment.

“Please don’t stop,” Billy murmured, and he wasn’t sure if he was asking him not to stop *this*, the kissing, or the relationship. It was probably both, but what did that matter?

Steve quickly nodded as he leaned in and kissed Billy again, deeper this time, as he pulled Billy closer to him. He could taste the water, and of course Billy’s cigarette, but there was also just *Billy* there too. Steve moaned quietly against his lips and pressed his body flush against Billy’s. Steve wanted Billy more than he ever wanted anything in his goddamn life, somebody who tried to understand him, who *fought* to understand him. He didn’t feel like he deserved Billy Hargrove.

He tried not to hurt Billy, no matter how desperately Steve wanted to grab him all over--Billy would be there later, they could do that later. Right now he just wanted to show Billy how much he appreciated him, show Billy that he deserved something to go right in his life, even Steve doubted he was that actual thing. One of his hands traveled down the length of Billy’s arm and he intertwined their fingers as his breath quickened, heart raced in Steve’s chest for more, “Billy Hargrove...my King Billy...”

Billy was so fucking glad he didn’t have to chase Steve’s lips. As soon as they were kissing again, he slid an arm around Steve’s waist, hauling him up against his chest (fuck the pain, he *needed* this). The other reached down to slide over his hip and then his ass. He brushed his thumb over the small of his back as he returned the kiss, easily dipping his tongue into Steve’s mouth and exploring him.

Billy felt like he was falling when Steve spoke, and maybe he was, just not in the physical sense. He moved the hand that was on Steve’s ass to his hair and twirled his fingers around the strands. He tugged, gently, forcing Steve to tip his head back. It broke the kiss, but it also allowed him to press a line of kisses from Steve’s lips to his throat.

Steve groaned when Billy grabbed him, pulled Steve as close as he possibly could, and Steve couldn’t help the way his body shook at that raw strength. It was so different from anything else he ever

experienced, and being against Billy made all those other times feel so insignificant--they paled in comparison to this overwhelming desire inside him to just feel and be kissed by Billy.

Steve hissed softly when Billy brought his head back and kissed at the exposed column of his neck. He closed his eyes tightly, allowed Billy to take what he wanted because Steve wanted to be taken. "Don't—don't ever think I don't want you—" Steve bit down hard on his lower lip, he knew he couldn't be that loud, but it was so goddamn hard not to lose control.

Billy moved the hand that wasn't in Steve's hair to his ass. He pulled him forward, so Steve could feel just *how much* Billy wanted him. His cock was already hard against his stomach, and having Steve pressed against him made him hiss against his skin. He kept his hand on Steve's ass for a few moments while he kissed down to his neck. He licked the skin there before biting down. It wasn't too hard--but it would leave a mark, especially as he began to suck.

Just as Billy let go of Steve's neck, the hand that was on his ass moved between them. He shifted his hips so that his fingers could curl over *both* of them.

"Say you want me," Billy breathed, leaning just enough to dip his tongue right above Steve's collarbone. He bit gently and then leaned up to catch his lips again.

Steve gasped out as Billy sucked at his neck, shuddered hard in excitement, when Billy reached down to touch both of them. Steve was incredibly hard and arched his pelvis towards Billy, ached for more of his touches, and he realized that Billy was making him burn all over again.

Steve panted harshly as Billy spoke to him, his eyes fluttering closed as Billy's tongue burned a path right under his neck. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he remembered Billy say that he would beg for him, beg to be touched. At the time it was equally embarrassing and hot, and Billy said it as a matter of fact, but now he realized it was true. He quickly nodded, moaned against Billy's lips and struggled to form the words as he got swept away. Once Steve finally spoke, it felt simple and natural, "I want you, I want you Billy, I only ever want

you—”

Billy felt Steve roll his hips and it made his lungs burn for oxygen. He licked along Steve's lower lip as he began to move his hand along both of their cocks, squeezing near the top before moving down again. He was lucky he was a big guy--even if Steve was taller, Billy was generally just bulkier, bigger. He *liked* that. Billy hissed against Steve's lips as he stroked over them again, swiping his thumb over Steve's slit before crawling his fingers back down.

“Put your hand around mine,” Billy muttered. He moved his free hand down to Steve's ass and curled his fingers there, forcing him forward into another stroke by tugging him. If he continued to make Steve talk, he may not last long (then again, he wouldn't, anyway--Steve *did that* to him).

Steve pressed his forehead to Billy's as he panted, reached between them and placed his hand over Billy's. He looked into Billy's eyes for a moment before it was *too much* and Steve screwed his eyes closed with a breathy moan. Steve licked his lips once before he bit down on his lower lip, quickly lost in the sensations of them pressed against one another.

Steve wanted to be quiet, knew he had to be quiet, and he felt this deep whimper from the back of his throat that made him bite down harder on his lip. Billy's fingers flexed and moved under his own hand as Billy stroked them both.

Billy sighed as Steve's fingers circled around his. He watched Steve until those eyes closed, until he knew Steve *couldn't* anymore and began to strengthen the movements of his hand. He dug his fingers into Steve's ass, holding him there as he breathed in his air and scent. It was almost dizzying because it felt like Steve was *everywhere* -- around him, in his skin. He tilted his head just enough to press a small kiss to the side of Steve's lips.

“Never lied about you bein' pretty,” Billy mused. He kept his own eyes open, watching all of the mixed expressions move over Steve's face as he continued to manipulate his hand. He really wanted to lean back against the wall for leverage, but he didn't want to risk slipping.

Steve laughed a little through a moan, his eyes fluttered open once as he looked at Billy, pressed his forehead there a little harder. "I told you—that's you, you're beautiful, Billy—" He kissed Billy again and moaned loudly for just a moment before he kissed him harder, tried to use Billy to keep himself quiet.

"I want you so much—" Steve bit down on Billy's lip and sucked hard. He moved his hand for just a moment to Billy's stomach, felt his muscles clench and tighten there and Steve was intoxicated with that power. Steve let out a small growl and kissed Billy fiercely. Anything Billy wanted, anything, he would do for him, just to feel him and how he felt exactly like this with Steve.

Billy flushed, but he was sure it wasn't noticeable in the heat of the shower and the tint already on his skin from the pleasure racing up and down his spine. He wasn't used to Steve being aggressive, demanding, and his cock jumped in his hand as Steve kissed him harder and *growled* at him. He sucked in a sharp breath and stuttered, trying to come up with *something*, but when he couldn't, he gently bit down on Steve's lower lip. He swiped his tongue across where he bit, panting already.

Easing himself back against the shower wall, Billy situated his feet so he wouldn't slip. He pulled Steve with him, basically encouraging him to lie against his body as they kissed and rutted against each other. He began to mumble Steve's name, breathy and eager, his hips moving of their own accord into his own hand.

Steve gasped raggedly and he stood up on his tiptoes for a moment, just to press up harder against Billy. It was a wonder Steve didn't fall and take them both down together. Steve's hand slid down to Billy's hip and he dug his fingers in, whimpered his name a moment as Steve closed his eyes and pressed their foreheads together again. "I want you so fuckin' much, Billy—I need you, you don't even know how much you're burning me—" Steve shook his head a moment, struggled to think, "I'm being too fucking loud, kiss me—"

But Steve grabbed him first, rutted against Billy desperately as he kissed him. Steve whispered again against Billy's lips how much he wanted him: it was a mantra that fell surprisingly easily from his lips and there was nothing more important to Steve in that moment than

Billy. Steve could feel that he was close, but there was no way he was going to just abandon Billy. So Steve allowed himself to get swept up, allowed that electricity to fill his body until it lighted him up from the inside out. His hand slid over the nape of Billy's neck and he arched into Billy again on his tiptoes. Steve did slip just a little that time, and he felt Billy grab at him, but Steve used it as an opportunity to claim Billy's mouth again as his knees went weak for just a moment.

Steve could barely breathe and he didn't feel like he was in control, but unlike his panicked screaming from earlier, this time he *wanted* to lose control because he knew Billy wasn't going to hurt him. Steve shook as his eyes opened and he searched Billy's face, repeated quickly and imploringly, "Tell me what you want, tell me anything and I'll do it Billy, anything, if you wanna fuck me--I *want* you to want to fuck me--anything--!"

Steve was *overwhelming*. Billy's hand stuttered around their cocks, frozen as Steve *demand*ed for him to do something, anything, and his heart felt like it was coming out of his chest. He stared at the other teen, watching the way his skin flushed and his lips parted every time he spoke. He watched how his doe eyes kept looking at his lips, at his body, and Billy wondered what in hell he did to deserve something like this--something so damned special.

Instead of speaking, Billy let go of their cocks and slid his hand to meet the other on Steve's ass. He slid his fingers along the crevice and watched Steve closely for any sign of panic or definite objections. Once his fingers brushed over Steve's hole, his own body tensed. Fucking Steve had been something he had wanted--for sure--but water wasn't lube, and he wasn't about to use soap. He couldn't just fuck Steve in the shower and expect it not to hurt.

Billy shifted and put his hands on Steve's hips to maneuver him against the wall. He traded positions with Steve and then easily turned him around. He pushed his chest against the wall, ignoring how hot the water was on his own back, and leaned in to press his lips against his shoulder.

"Stay there for me, okay?" Billy eased himself down onto his knees and kissed the small of Steve's back. His hands went back to his ass

and squeezed. “Just stay still, Steve. Understand?” His own voice was thick with desire, his movements a bit desperate. He slid his thumbs through the crevice of Steve’s ass and then spread him open. “Y’okay, Steve?” He wanted to keep checking--to keep making sure that this was okay.

When Billy was silent, for just a moment Steve thought he went too far, asked for too much. But he truly wanted whatever Billy was willing to give him, no matter how much it terrified him. Those fingers were Billy’s response and Steve felt confused for just a moment as he swallowed nervously. He roughly knew the mechanics of how this would go, but it was different to feel those fingers actually touching him.

Steve’s heart raced and he let out a soft groan when Billy first touched him. It wasn’t bad, just foreign, and he could feel Billy’s gaze on him, ready to pull back if it was too much for Steve. Steve always considered himself to be a considerate lover, and now he could only dimly appreciate that Billy seemed to be one as well.

Billy turned Steve slow, carefully again, like he wanted to give Steve a chance to back out. He felt a little confused as Billy gently pushed him against the wall, which felt incredibly cold against his overheated body and cock, Steve hissed loudly when Billy kissed his shoulder, and Steve slowly melted against the wall.

“Ye-yeah, I can do that—” Steve glanced back once and watched Billy ease himself down. Steve frowned for a moment, concerned he was again pushing Billy past his physical comfort at the moment. Steve softly stammered out, “I-I have stuff back in my room, I have like l-lube and condoms and t-things—” The lube was an embarrassing purchase that Nancy had him get when they were together, after the first time they had sex and Nancy carefully explained how things were going to go down in the future. Steve wasn’t going to bring that up now, wasn’t even sure if that’s really what Billy had in mind, but his body and mind went still when Billy parted his ass cheeks.

Steve’s face flushed darkly and he pressed his cheek against the wall, and Jesus it wasn’t even close to cold enough anymore. He wasn’t really sure what Billy was doing, felt completely out of his element, but he trusted Billy. “Yeah, I’m okay, I’m okay...” A shiver ran

through him as he licked his lips nervously. Steve closed his eyes and once again this whole thing felt incredibly intimate, not just sex, but that Billy was pulling him apart agonizingly slow just for the pleasure of watching Steve.

“Later,” was all Billy said before he ran his thumb over Steve’s hole. His gaze flickered up, evaluating Steve for a moment. He loved doing this--he *loved* watching guys he liked unravel--so he couldn’t imagine how much he’d like seeing Steve do the same thing. He leaned forward, and as he dug his fingers into Steve’s ass, he dipped his tongue over that bundle of muscle. His eyes closed, and he held Steve still as he continued to lick and prod.

Lube would come later. So would fucking. Hell, if Steve was even aware enough after this to do that. Billy wasn’t sure--and he also wasn’t sure about how much movement he could actually make with these injuries. He wanted to fuck Steve, there was no questioning that, but he wanted it to be *good*, and he was a little fucked up for that. He pushed those thoughts off, though, and pressed his tongue *into* Steve, waiting to hear him, to feel him, to see how he would react.

The first thing Steve did was not listen. As soon as Billy placed his tongue there, his eyes widened and Steve quickly turned his head in shock and maybe a little anger, “Billy, what the fuck--” Steve was sure that Billy was messing with him, that Billy was teasing him now that Steve had finally caved. But Billy wasn’t laughing and certainly wasn’t insulting him. When he felt those fingers press even harder against his skin and Billy’s tongue *inside* him, Steve’s whole face flushed dark red.

That was something that Steve had never done, never considered doing. It seemed dark and disgusting and his body tensed as he screwed his eyes closed, rested his cheek against the tile, and tried to focus on the sensations and not the nervous butterflies in his stomach. How did Billy know how to do this--how did he even *think* about doing this?

“You don’t have to--nnnnn!” Steve felt his cock twitch against the cold wall as Billy’s tongue pressed up and Steve left out a loud and obscene groan. “Aw, fuck, fuck--” Steve struggled to find something,

anything to grab onto when this spark lit up inside him, all the way up his spine to his head. Steve brought up one of his arms and rested it against the tile, pillowed his head against his arm as his fingertips turned white as he pressed his hand hard on the tile. Steve shook his head a little, tried to come to his senses, that had felt so goddamn good...Steve breathlessly moaned, "What the fuck are you doing, what the fuck..."

Billy would have laughed if he wasn't tongue deep in Steve's body. He pulled himself back to gently bite one of Steve's ass cheeks, his grin never leaving his lips as he looked over Steve--panting and moaning and completely thrown off. That's what he wanted. He licked his lips and leaned forward to drag his tongue over him again, repeating the motion until he finally decided to invade Steve's body again.

It was only a short time that he was there, though. Billy pulled back and pinched Steve's hip. "Turn around, baby," he murmured. He desperately wanted lube so he could fuck Steve, but he'd have to deal with this for now. Besides, Steve had just come down from a fucking panic attack. He was *not* taking advantage of him after that. He'd make him feel great, get him off, and then he'd put him in his bed and help him sleep.

Because sometimes, Billy wasn't such a shit person.

Steve swore loudly and bit down on his forearm when Billy dragged his tongue there. His thighs shook and he barely heard Billy speaking to him, but his body listened. Steve turned and felt the tiles against his back as he panted in hard, shuddering breaths. His eyes were barely open as his head hung a little, and he felt momentarily stunned as he looked down at Billy.

"How do you know that shit, Billy, that was insane..." Steve gently placed his hand on Billy's shoulder and he could just feel that electricity thrumming hard through both their bodies. "I'm just trying to stay quiet, I know—I know I'm being too loud." He didn't recall what he was like before, not fully anyway in that moment, but Steve was aware it was never like that before, when he just couldn't stop himself from feeling his partner. That was all Billy.

Steve's face made Billy's stomach clench. He licked his lips in that same, ridiculously lewd way that he enjoyed doing so much and then chuckled. "Really, Harrington, you're just fuckin' *vanilla* , is all." He slid his hands over Steve's thighs and then curled one around his cock. He leaned forward and drug his tongue over the head. The taste of his pre-cum made Billy moan, and he opened his mouth to take just the head into his mouth. When his eyes flickered up to Steve, they were dark with desire--he *wanted* Steve.

Billy's free hand moved around his hip and to his ass again. He pulled him forward gently, forcing Steve to move so that his cock slid further into his throat. He started to suck immediately, pressing his tongue to the hot skin that he could reach. His fingers dug into Steve's ass, along the crevice, as if teasing him despite the fact that Billy had his cock in his throat.

Steve wanted to retort that he wasn't like that, it wasn't like he hadn't slept with other people before, but he couldn't when Billy took him back in his mouth. His eyes widened a little as he watched Billy and bit down hard on his lower lip when Billy made noises around him, *on him* , and it vibrated on his cock.

He took a little stuttering step at Billy's urging and felt Billy's hands on his ass again when he slid into Billy's mouth. Steve let out a low, keening whine when he was inside that warmth. His body bowed forward as his hands fell to Billy's shoulders as he gripped them hard. He had to bite down on his lip again and close his eyes to try to focus on shutting himself up, and while he instantly missed watching Billy, he was still drowning in the sensations the blonde caused.

The fact that Billy could keep Steve from talking made him want to laugh, but his mouth was occupied, so he continued to suck and ease his lips down. Once most of Steve's cock was inside of his throat, he swallowed. The pressure bothered him, but not enough for him to pull back. He breathed deeply out of his nose as Steve's hands settled on his shoulders. He *liked* that Steve touched him, even if it was because he couldn't really keep himself up.

Slowly, because Billy was an asshole, he slipped his lips to the tip of Steve's cock and flicked his tongue over the slit. He looked up at Steve and grinned. "Y'okay there, pretty boy?" he murmured, lips

brushing Steve's cock as he spoke. "Somethin' you need?"

Steve's grip tightened on Billy's shoulders as he shook, as Billy took him inside his mouth. He bit down harder on his lip but that didn't stop the noises that rose up inside him, deep in the back of his throat. His thighs shook harder when Billy slowly pulled away and Steve would have decked Billy if that didn't mean that this would stop immediately.

Steve's face was flushed deeply as he opened his eyes, barely seeing Billy for just a moment, before he saw that goddamn smirk on his face. Steve groaned and without even hearing Billy, Steve knew what he wanted. Billy wanted to watch Steve cave, and he hated that he was too goddamn far past being able to refuse that. His voice was thick with lust as he harshly whispered, "Don't-don't make me--" Steve licked his lips as he exhaled, tried to collect himself from the pieces Billy was breaking off, "You, I need you, Billy..."

Billy's grin widened as he looked over Steve's face, into his eyes, along his lips, and down his body. Steve was fucking *hard*, and Billy continued to tease him by slipping his tongue over the head of his cock. He tongued the slit, only for a moment, and then pressed his lips there. His gaze flitted from Steve's stomach to his face again and his lips spread into that smug-ass grin again.

"Need me? How do you need me, Steve? C'mon, baby, talk to me." Billy chuckled and slid his hand that was on the base of Steve's cock to the tip. He stroked him a few times while watching, that gaze of his predatory. "Tell me what you need and I'll do it."

Steve groaned and leaned back, hit his head gently against the wall as he licked his lips again. "Why do you always gotta talk so goddamn much..." And Steve meant for it to sound insulting, but it came across more as a whine. Steve looked back down, back down at that knowing smirk, as Steve swallowed hard. He wasn't going to finish without doing exactly what Billy wanted but his heart ached for a moment and he could feel his face heating up in embarrassment.

Steve's hips moved along with Billy's strokes, and he drowned in that for a few seconds before that too was taken away. "Fuckkk...." Steve tried to think for a moment, "I-I want your mouth on me, Billy, that's

what I want--!"

"That's all you had to say, pretty boy," Billy mused. He enjoyed that Steve's hips moved into his strokes, that he was needy enough to show that. He kept his fingers curled at the base of Steve's cock, holding him as he opened his mouth and slid his lips over the smooth skin. He sucked just at the head for a moment, enjoying the way pleasure raced down *his own body* from giving it to Steve. His lips moved further down, his tongue pressing up again Steve as he sucked and swallowed with each movement.

Billy seemed to enjoy taking Steve in, his entire body relaxed as he focused on what he was doing and not on his pain, not on what had just happened, not on how much he kept fucking up. Instead, he poured everything into what he was doing to Steve, *for* Steve, because he was shit at words but amazing with his hands and his mouth.

Steve moaned out loudly again when Billy took him into his mouth, Steve tilted his head back and looked at the ceiling for a moment as he hissed out a harsh "YES" at Billy took him back into his mouth. Steve glanced back down, panting as he watched Billy take him further. He remembered taking Billy in his mouth and he idly wondered if Billy enjoyed this as much as he had. It wasn't so much the act, but when he felt Billy pulse in his mouth--

Steve's breath quickened a moment and his hand shook as he reached out and gently slid his hand in Billy's wet hair. His words poured from his mouth in a soft but deeply reverent tone, "You're fucking amazing Billy Hargrove...."

Billy's eyes flickered up in surprise when Steve spoke to him. He had even stopped sucking for a moment, completely caught off guard by how sincere Steve sounded. A second went by where Billy's eyes were wide and bottomless, so many emotions sweeping through him that he wasn't even sure how to fucking hide it. When he managed to compose himself, he looked away quickly and went back to what he was doing, even if something in his chest twisted.

The thought that someone could think any more of him than a fuck or trouble still startled Billy. That was obvious enough, and he was

avoiding the shit out of looking at Steve, his eyes now closed as he moved his lips to the very tip of his cock before swallowing him again. He just had to focus on what he was doing--not what Steve had said.

Steve tried to speak again as he watched those emotions flicker across Billy's face, his eyes stormy with thought, when Billy resumed sucking him. "You don't--ahh--!" Steve bit down on his lip again, he knew what Billy was doing, wasn't surprised by it, but it hurt him that Billy couldn't really see what he saw. Those little moments of earnest compassion coupled with raw power, that was what made Steve want to come undone.

Steve's hands slipped back down to Billy's shoulders as he held on there. His back bowed again and he allowed it to happen freely this time, not exactly seeing Billy but above his head as he harshly moaned, "King Billy, my King...Billy please...!" And it felt so much easier to say that than what Billy asked of him earlier, because it wasn't just for himself. "You're going to make me come--!"

Just like Billy had done previously, he moved down further and only swallowed more at the warning of Steve being ready to cum. He took him in as far as he could while one hand gripped his ass and the other kept a steady hold on the base of his case. His eyes stayed closed because he *wasn't* going to look at Steve. Not at the sincerity in his eyes. Not at the gentleness. Not at the obvious emotions that were there. He wanted to give Steve *this*. This wasn't about Billy. He had fucked up so badly that he had sent Steve into a damned panic attack.

This was about making things right, and it was Billy's own fucked up way at an apology. He dug his fingers into Steve's ass and pulled him forward, keeping him there as he continued to swallow, eager to just feel Steve *let go*. He didn't even respond to Steve rambling at him, gearing all of his focus on simply giving Steve everything that he could.

Steve shut his eyes as he said Billy's name over and over again until he sharply cried out. It was loud, really loud, but Steve didn't care at the moment, didn't care about anything but his own pleasure and *his* Billy. Steve came hard as these sparks set off inside him and he gave

another half-shout as his body shook uncontrollably. He could feel Billy swallowing around him, holding him up so that Steve didn't fall on top of him as his breathing turned ragged and he was left gasping above him.

He wasn't sure how Billy was able to bring him into the brink like that, but it was always Steve who wanted to jump off the ledge. The water felt cool on his back and he wasn't sure if there was no more hot water left or if he just felt hotter than the setting, both possibilities seemed equally viable. When Steve finally opened his eyes, there was Billy, looking right at him with this intense gaze that shook him harder than the orgasm had.

Billy took absolutely everything that Steve gave. He swallowed until there was nothing left and kept one hand braced on his hip. The other hand found his thigh, supporting him long after he had cum down his throat. When he finally leaned back, he licked his lips and looked up at Steve. There was a strange explosion in his chest when Steve's eyes caught his, and his breath caught in his throat.

It had only been a number of days. Only days, and Steve was digging into his chest and uprooting everything. He was planting himself and making Billy ache for normalcy, for something more than just *like* . He tore his gaze away from Steve, finally, his lips swollen and parted to take in sharp pants. Getting Steve off made his own body thrum, so he was painfully hard and so fucking aware of Steve. He closed his eyes and tried his best to pull himself together.

Steve sucked on his lower lip as he tried to catch his breath, searched over at Billy's face. Billy wasn't talking to him, but it was strange because Steve felt like he didn't need to. Steve wasn't sure what to say, what to say to make Billy actually think that he was worth a damn in this life. All of that cocky attitude was gone and Steve could see that Billy was raw and filled with doubt.

Steve swallowed, his body still shaking as he carefully sank down in the shower. He wrapped an arm around Billy's neck as he knelt down and carefully situated himself on Billy lap. It was awkward as hell, but when Billy was looking at him with this shockingly beautiful expression, Steve didn't really care. He knew Billy wasn't going to have sex with him, not *tonight* , but he wasn't going to let Billy not

have his pleasure too.

His heart fluttered in his chest as he leaned forward and used one arm to reach back. Steve gently touched Billy's cock before he started to slowly rock in his lap, felt Billy's cock against the cleft of his ass as he moved there.

Billy hated that, as soon as Steve touched him, he was pulled from his thoughts and completely focused again. Steve *did that* to him. He made him stay in the present and sink in whatever what was going on. He tilted his head so he could look at Steve. He didn't make any moves to touch Steve, not yet, because he wasn't certain what he was doing. Eventually, though, it clicked-- *especially* as Steve began to roll his hips down against him, his ass basically stroking his cock.

For a moment, all Billy could do was breathe. Breathe and try not to stutter as Steve moved. He finally reached up and slid his fingers over Steve's sides, his hips, stroking along his hip bones. The only noise that came out of him were little gasps and grunts. His fingers tightened on Steve's hips and all he could think about was painting Steve's back with his cum. It made him dizzy thinking about it.

Billy buried his face into Steve's neck, panting against the wet skin. He still didn't speak, too overwhelmed by everything to do much more than respond to Steve's body.

"No, no," was Steve's voice, soft but still thick with lust as he turned Billy's head back up gently. He paused for a moment, his own chest heaving and he stilled for just a moment as Steve looked down at Billy. Steve remained slightly above him as he kept his gaze on Billy and took the blonde's mouth, gave him a slow, wet open-mouthed kiss. Steve quietly groaned into Billy's mouth when their tongues touched and Steve sucked Billy's lower lip and dragged it slightly with his teeth, pulled back slowly to look back down at him.

Steve arched and rolled his hips again only then. He tightened his arm that was draped over one of Billy's shoulders and squeezed slightly. His own breath quickened as he held Billy's gaze, steady and unwavering. "Like this...."

Billy almost fought against Steve, thinking that a struggle would be

better than opening himself up. He ended up not fighting, though, even though his breaths came out harsher than before (and not because of pleasure). When his eyes met Steve's again, he felt the mix of pleasure, confusion, and something else he wasn't willing to name (also fucking fear because this *meant* something).

"Steve--" His voice sounded almost broken, and Billy hated it. He slid his tongue over Steve's to try to distract himself, to pull him away from his fears. His body started to take control, though, the pleasure beginning to override whatever was going on in his brain as Steve moved. His chest began to rise and fall faster, his eyes beginning to lose focus as he let himself just *feel* .

Steve licked his lips as he watched Billy's expression slowly glaze over as they both began to move together, Billy arching his hips and rubbing against him. Steve was happy Billy had already taken care of him because watching Billy now--it was so hot and beautiful and just *everything* .

He knew he was pushing Billy, but he really wanted to make him understand. Steve was so tired of running, he wanted this, he wanted Billy so bad, and it felt like this ache inside him only stopped hurting when they were together. Billy had a language all his own, the way he moved, the way he responded--and Steve was going to speak his language to make him understand just how much Billy meant to him.

Steve flushed despite himself as he rolled his hips a little quicker. He swallowed, tried to focus on what he wanted rather than the words themselves as he whispered above Billy, "I want you to come baby, I want you to watch you come...can you do that for me?"

Billy's lips parted and he wished he didn't feel so unbearably wrecked beneath Steve. He wished that, as Steve looked down at him, he didn't feel so fucking wanted. So *good* , but he did, and for once, he let the feeling stay instead of stomping it down, let it warm his chest and spread throughout his body. His eyelids fluttered down as he watched Steve, trying his damned hardest to keep eye contact despite everything telling him to look away.

At Steve's question, his whole body felt warm. He wasn't sure if he was blushing or if his body was overwhelmed by the pleasure. It was

probably both, but Billy told himself not to care. Instead, he reached around Steve's waist and slid his hand over his ass. He did it in a way that trapped his cock there, helped push the flesh through just the crevice, and he hissed out.

"Steve," Billy clenched his jaw, but only for a moment before he let go. His whole body thrummed as the coil deep in his spine unleashed and shot out. He closed his eyes, tightly, and then realized that Steve wanted to see him as he came. He opened them, again, although it was difficult and he was hazy, his body shaking as his cum covered his hand and part of Steve's back.

At that moment, Billy watched Steve, even if he wasn't clear. He watched him and felt fucking *wanted* and suddenly, it wasn't just his body exploding. His lips closed tightly as tears began to spill down his cheeks. He finally looked away from Steve and hated that he was shaking now for an entirely different reason.

Steve started to laugh softly, felt like he finally had managed to get Billy to open up and Steve was able to do something to Billy for once when he felt Billy shaking hard under him. Whatever Steve was going to say immediately halted. Steve's heart clenched while he watched Billy begin to cry. "Ah, shit, no Billy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean--"

Steve felt panic rise up inside him that he hurt Billy deeply like this, *especially* like this when they were both being open and intimate with each other. Steve pressed quick kisses over Billy's face before he captured his lips softly. Steve knelt up higher as he softly tilted Billy's jaw up. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, I wasn't trying to do that, I swear..." Steve's knees ached but seeing Billy's expression made him want to kiss away whatever Billy was feeling at that moment.

Billy felt like he couldn't breathe as Steve apologized, as he kissed over his face and then took his lips. He returned the light kiss, but it was weak and uncertain. He wanted Steve--there was no question about that--but he also didn't... he didn't *feel* like he deserved him. No matter what Steve threw at him, barb, jab, insult, Billy didn't care. He'd always be too good for Billy; even Max saw that.

"No--no, Steve," Billy chuckled, although it was dry and almost

hollow. "It's fine. Just. Not used to this." He licked his lips and glanced up at Steve. "I'm sorta a fuck and leave guy. I'm not used... to this." This was emotions. This was feeling something deeply and not knowing what the fuck to do with it. "It's not--it's not *bad*. I just. Fuck." And now he was staring at Steve's chest, completely frustrated with himself that he couldn't even make a full fucking sentence.

Steve watched Billy carefully and he relaxed just a little when Billy spoke and revealed that at least Steve didn't massively fuck this up. He was quiet for a moment and tried to think of what he could possibly say or do to make Billy feel better. Despite what Billy said, Steve wasn't really concerned Billy was going to fuck and leave him. If anything, Billy would run away, and that was just...different.

"Yeah well, I don't fuck guys either, but here we are, right?" They both were in very unfamiliar territory, and that didn't even count their respective personal issues. Steve glanced away for just a moment before he quickly spoke again, didn't allow Billy to get a word in edgewise, "I know there's something here. I'm not stupid and neither are you. I don't know what's going to happen later, but I'm not going anywhere Billy. And if you run away, I will chase you the fuck down." Steve looked at Billy intently, his brow furrowed to show that he truly meant it, knew what he wanted even if he just blurted this out.

Billy almost barked out a laugh at Steve's comment about fucking guys. His lips curled in amusement, despite the lingering tears in his eyes. Shit. Steve was fucking awful. He snickered and shook his head. Shit. Shit. He had to compose himself. He felt crazy--crying one second and laughing the next. He sighed heavily and glanced up to catch Steve's eyes. Run away? Yeah, that sounded about right.

"I like the idea of being chased by you, Harrington," Billy murmured finally, "But I'm thinkin' I'd probably outrun you. You're pretty scrawny." He grinned again and pressed a light kiss to the side of Steve's face. He stayed there for a moment, his lips close to Steve's ear. "I'm not going anywhere, either." He squeezed his arm around Steve's waist. "But... my ass is starting to hurt. So maybe we should clean up and head to bed, yeah?"

"I am *not* scrawny," Steve retorted with a little glare that melted as

he took in Billy's words and his kiss. He slowly smiled and nodded, that ache returning to his knees again as he used pushed himself up with a groan and extended a hand towards Billy.

Steve pulled the blonde up slowly and couldn't stop a wide smile from blossoming on his face. The water was ice cold now, but he didn't really give a shit. Everything else was far from his mind, everything but Billy and taking care of him. Steve leaned over and gave Billy a soft kiss, still smiling against his lips when Steve tensed for just a moment.

His smile faltered and Steve frowned in thought. "Hey...you don't think Max heard us, right?" As if Billy had somehow been the loudest of the two.

Billy *did* laugh then, head tilted back and eyes sparkling. "Oh, *pretty boy* ," he purred, leaning up to nip Steve's lower lip. "She definitely heard you." He laughed again, so amused that he couldn't keep it to himself. It was distracting enough that, at first, he didn't notice Steve's hand. He just continued to chuckle until he could control himself, and when he did, he finally took Steve's offered hand and pulled himself up.

The cold water didn't bother him. Often, after his run ins with Neil, a cold shower calmed him down.

Steve flushed darkly at that, "No...do you really think so?" Steve made a little grimace thinking about that, he knew he was a little loud with Billy and that wasn't something he was used to. "Ah, Jesus Christ...." Steve let out an exasperated sigh, he had *really* tried. Max might know about them, but the kid did not need to be traumatized any more than she already was.

Steve crowded a little into Billy's space for the spray, felt the water hit his back and it gave him a little jolt of shock. The idea that anybody heard Steve like that, so goddamn wanton, was incredibly humiliating and he exhaled hard and loudly.

"You don't sound *that* bad, Steve," Billy mused, making gentle fun at him. He reached down and grabbed the soap. Once he lathered the bar into his hand, he began to slide it over Steve's shoulders, his

arms, along his back and sides. He made gentle circles with it, quiet, then, as if he was concentrating on what he was doing.

Although, because the water was cold, Billy worked at a quick pace, making sure that he got all the cum off Steve's back (and maybe grinning to himself as he did it). He kissed Steve's neck as he washed his stomach, his chest as he washed his thighs, being ridiculously and stupidly affectionate. But it felt okay, especially since Steve was so embarrassed (Billy found it exceedingly hilarious).

"It's more like, her knowing what we're doing than how I sound..." Steve pouted a little, frowned in thought as Billy began to wash him. He arched his eyebrows in genuine surprise, but made no move to push Billy away.

Steve relished the gentle touches, the care that Billy took with his body, and it made him feel incredibly and stupidly happy as Steve smiled. Everything that Steve had felt that evening, all of those emotions paled in comparison to this one as Steve received soft kisses on his neck. Steve laughed softly and just thought of how it was yet another moment that Billy fucking Hargrove was actually amazing.

Steve gently took his hand, intertwined their fingers again, "C'mon, I'm clean enough now and I'm fucking freezing."

"You make pretty nice noises," Billy conceded, although he was trying not to laugh. He set the soap down and then turned the knob of the shower. When the water stopped, he shivered and realized just how cold it actually was. He slid the door open and stepped out. It was almost warmer in the damn bathroom. He looked back at Steve, his fingers still intertwined with his, and smiled.

"Comin, princess? I think I'm about to fall over. I need sleep," Billy squeezed his hand and let go of his hand to grab a couple of towels. He threw one at Steve and smirked as it hit him in the head.

"I don't think Max would see it that way," or anybody else for that matter. Steve often thought of himself as fairly plain and Billy's fascination with *pretty* always baffled Steve. What was really hard was not staring at *Billy*. The water dripped and ran slowly down the hard planes of Billy's body and Steve openly stared. Steve already felt

this urge to be close to him again. Instead, he stood there and raked his eyes over Billy, bit down gently on his lower lip--until a towel hit his face and Steve jerked out of his stupor.

Steve made a face at Billy and quickly grabbed for the towel in his surprise. He grumbled, but climbed out of the shower and wrapped the towel around his waist. "I'm coming, asshole..." Steve pouted as he trailed after him into his bedroom. When he entered though, Steve paused a moment and looked at the lights that were on, lights *he* hadn't turned on. He tensed as he looked at Billy, frowned slightly. "Did *you* turn these on?"

It wasn't right to lie of course, but the alternative right now-- Max said she could prove it and for Billy trust her. The problem was when that trust caused him to lie to Steve's face.

Billy wasn't surprised that the lights were on. Max was intuitive, and he somewhat liked that about her (sometimes, it got them both into trouble). He glanced over the lights and then smirked. What a brat. "I figured it would set the right mood." He raised an eyebrow at Steve, as if saying that would somehow be flirtatious. Although, with how Steve acted outside, next to the pool, and with his six bats--the lights were more of a security blanket.

"I'm too exhausted for anything special now, though," Billy reached back and scratched his neck. His gaze flickered around Steve's room again before they landed on him. "So... I'm gonna be an ass and assume you wouldn't mind me sleeping in here, with you, yeah?" He pulled the towel off of where he slung it around his hips and dropped it to the side.

Steve's body noticeably relaxed by Billy's words as he smiled. Steve felt a little silly, rounded the corner closer to Billy and he saw that the lights were plugged in. It's not like it would just be holding steady if it was *that* , wouldn't even need to be plugged in.

"Of course you're sleeping in here...." And when Billy dropped his towel, Steve stared at him again for a *good* minute before he lamely concluded, "With some thick pants on."

A flush was on Steve's cheeks as he quickly turned away and grabbed

his own pajamas, hopped into them before he slid into the bed. “So...I *exhausted* you, huh, Hargrove?” Steve smirked a little as he settled back in the bed, his gaze still on Billy.

Billy chuckled at the pants suggestion. Truly, he just liked seeing Harrington squirm. He shifted and reached down to pick up a pair of sweats (he didn’t care if they were Steve’s, they were convenient). He pulled them on and glanced over to the bed. “Mm. You’re an exhausting guy. I should have known, though, considering what a princess you are.

With a grin, Billy slid into the bed and carefully adjusted himself to his side. After hesitating, he reached out and tucked an arm around Steve’s waist. His fingers brushed the small of his back, traveling up his spine. Despite being in bed with Steve, his mind was on Max and what she wanted to show him.

“I’m going to take a wild guess here. I feel like you are going to throw a fit if I try to go to school,” Billy settled his cheek on the pillow as he watched Steve. It was sort of strange--how far they had come. Still fighting. Still fucking. Still being affectionate. Billy was okay with that, though. If it meant he could sleep in Steve’s bed (and help him get an actual night’s rest), he’d be okay with it forever.

Steve rolled his eyes a little, “I didn’t realize princesses were exhausting.” He watched Billy carefully, concerned that he should head downstairs and get Billy some medicine to help him rest, and maybe a small pang of guilt that he pushed the guy a little too much.

He laughed softly though as Steve felt Billy’s fingertips dance along his back, a little teasing at first before it just felt warm, Billy’s thumb slowly rubbing across his skin. Steve smiled as he looked over Billy’s face, he was unsure if Billy was hurt but he looked...relaxed. Maybe even happy.

“Ding ding ding, winner.” Steve was still smiling as he scooted a little closer. “You really need some rest, probably away from both Max and me. And I don’t know when Hopper is going to need you and maybe take you to court....” The restraining order, Steve hadn’t forgotten. It was going to be the first step in a really long process for both Billy and Max. “I can take Max to school.”

Billy snorted at how immature Steve sounded. He pressed their foreheads together, despite that, and playfully nipped at his lower lip. "Not nice, pretty boy." He murmured before shifting in the bed to get himself more comfortable. He kept that one hand on Steve's back while the other arm stayed beneath the pillow, propping his head up.

"You'd have to. The Camaro is at dad's," Billy hated that, too. He wanted his damned car, but he knew that going over there wasn't such a great idea right now. Hell, his keys were still in the house. "I think I'll get that shit over and done with," Billy mused bitterly. "Call Hopper and file that so I don't have to think about it anymore."

"I'll have Hopper help me get the Camaro, and then I can pick Max up from school." Billy squinted at Steve, as if daring him to say anything. The least he could do is just pick her up (and figure out what the shit is going on).

Steve frowned a little, he wasn't sure it could just be done with, not like that, but he wasn't going to say that to Billy. Steve was honestly just happy that Billy resolved to end the situation, end his relationship with his piece of shit father. Nobody fucking deserved that. He wanted to ask Billy if he was going to be up for all this, court, picking up Max, dealing with his feelings for his father. Steve wanted to tell Billy it was okay to ask for help, to feel overwhelmed, but he didn't think the blonde would appreciate the coddling, so he just nodded instead.

"Yeah, of course, she's your sister." Steve smiled and leaned in, kissed him softly. "Just...tell me if you need something, okay, Hargrove? I fucking mean it." He knew that was going to be hard for Billy, the guy didn't seem to depend on anybody for anything, but he wasn't just going to leave him out to dry. Steve *wanted* to be there.

Billy was watching Steve, and he could see those gears turning. He huffed and then smiled against Steve's lips. Again, all he could think about was how stupid Nancy was to give up someone so amazing. He almost rolled his eyes at the thought of Steve being with a girl. Honestly, what a waste. His gaze landed on Steve again and he smirked.

"I know you mean it," Billy replied easily. He was deflecting, but that

was Billy. He didn't like relying on anyone. Hell, it was hard enough accepting Steve's help now (he wanted to say it was because Max was involved--but he *really fucking liked* Steve). "I'm sure it'll be fine."

Steve smiled harder as he felt Billy's lips quick up and he laughed softly. "Alright, alright, you pick up Max and do what you need to do." Steve's stretched his arm over Billy and looked his face. "Get some sleep, before I drug you again, asshole." Steve made it a point to close his eyes, even though he still had a smile on his face, clearly betraying that he was still awake.

He really hoped Billy would rely on him, no matter how much his Dad was a piece of shit, it was still Billy's Dad. That wasn't going to be easy, no matter the circumstances. Steve quickly inched closer and tucked his head under Billy's. He was determined to hold it together for Billy, no more of his own bullshit. Billy saw some bad moments and maybe they could talk about it later, but Billy knew everything he could safely know. It was Billy's turn to be taken care of.

13. Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

I drew on my own experiences to contribute to this chapter. The first time I helped a restraining order victim was in 2013, and even though the setting here is 1984, court is often very informal and messy, especially in rural communities. Victims get caught in the crossfire so please always believe and listen to them, and that's all I have to say. Angst and smut to follow.

Billy managed a couple of hours of sleep. Steve was right about one thing--being at the courthouse wasn't fucking easy. He stood stiffly next to Hopper, his hands clenched at his sides and his eyes on the floor. Every once in awhile, he would look up and evaluate who he was seeing, what Hopper was doing, and what he was supposed to be doing. Sometimes, he'd fade out completely and Hopper would have to squeeze his shoulder or say his name more times than he'd like.

The good thing was that Billy hadn't seen his father. Not yet. Part of him was glad, but another part wondered how Neil would look after a couple days in jail. He knew Neil deserved it, but he was also his fucking dad, and *he'd* put him in there. He licked his lips nervously and glanced over to Hopper again. He hadn't spoken much--mostly because he was too choked up to do so.

There was an attorney across from Billy and he didn't look all that much older from Billy himself. Hopper was silent as police officers filtered in and out of a large conference room, talking loudly and laughing. None of them paid a great deal of attention to Billy. Hopper told Billy that the kid was the prosecutor on his case and he didn't seem really happy about it. His affect was flat when he made the introductions and it didn't give Billy a lot of confidence. His name was Tom Ramsey. "Call me Tom," the attorney smiled at Billy, tight and nervous. He was a large man, but he had the demeanor of somebody about ready to collapse in on himself.

"Alright! So what I'm going to do is put you on the stand and you'll

just answer a few questions. I don't believe your father has obtained an attorney, so Judge Colloway will likely just let him speak at the end. Are you ready to answer my questions, Billy?" His voice dropped slightly, and he spoke and looked at Billy as if he was a child and not nearly an adult. There was loud laughter somewhere down the hall behind Billy.

Billy felt so fucking jumpy that his ears rang in the room. The white noise was back again, creating weird, scratchy noises in his brain as he tried to process exactly what was going on. He watched the attorney quietly, his lips set into a thin line as he listened to him. His fingers twitched whenever there was a loud noise and sometimes, his hands clenched. His heart was thundering in his chest at the thought of answering questions.

"Yeah. I can do that," Billy glanced over to Hopper, as if he had answers, and then down again. He felt young again, like a child (fuck, wasn't he too young for this shit, anyway?). He looked around the room, everywhere but the attorney for a moment.

"Okay, Billy, it'll be the same questions on the stand, alright? I'm just preparing you a little bit right now." He looked down his glasses at Billy before he turned his gaze back to a single sheet of photocopied paper and grabbed his pen. "So Billy can you tell me about the bruises you have right now? When did that take place?"

Billy's mouth went dry. "Depends on which ones you're talking about." He replied and then bit his lower lip. Right. He couldn't deflect like he was used to. "Uhm. Two days ago. A week ago. Depends on which ones..."

"Okay, okay, and can you tell me how the last time started? What exactly did your father say before he hit you?" Hopper cleared his throat a little, he didn't touch Billy or try to comfort him, figured the kid would bolt if he did. But he wanted to let Billy know he was there at least and on his side in case things were too uncomfortable to bear alone. He was sure that he wouldn't have done this against his old man, even if anybody would have listened to him in those days.

The problem was that Billy couldn't remember *exactly*. It was the same shit over and over again. "That I'm useless. A f-faggot. The last

time--he was pissed when I told him that I called the cops. It's the same shit, usually. Respect and responsibility. Being a good brother."

When Billy said the word "faggot," the attorney looked up at him, looked at Billy *really* carefully, as if he was trying to judge whether or not it was actually true. But Billy didn't look like what somebody from Hawkins, Indiana would think of as queer so he just gave a nod. There was another round of laughter, somewhere to Billy's right, almost as if they were laughing at *him*. "I have the latest doctor's report from the hospital, but you said this happened often, have you been to the hospital before? Did you ever tell anybody what was happening?"

Billy's stomach turned and his palms began to sweat. He rubbed his palms against his jeans and glanced to the side. His ears were still ringing. When he looked back at the attorney, he hesitated. "Once. I don't remember much of the hospital stay. I lost some teeth. A lot of minor fractures, I think? He told them I got into a fight at school or something." The next question made him flinch. "No. Fuck no. I didn't tell anyone."

The attorney sighed, as if Billy's response just made him feel weary, and maybe it did. Billy couldn't have been the only fucked up kid in Hawkins. But the noise was clear that Billy was a burden, made things difficult on his own. "Alright...Sheriff Hopper has given me a sworn statement regarding your sister, excuse me, *step-sister*, Maxine. Now apparently she...shot at your father? And she's...12? Is that correct?" The attorney scribbled a few things on a legal pad beside him, the pen scratched loudly when he underlined something several times.

Dread settled in Billy's chest and he closed his eyes. He hated that Max got dragged into this, but he also knew that his father may have not stopped if she hadn't. "Yeah," his voice was soft, reluctant, and he felt fucking tiny again. He shifted again and clasped his hands together so he could dig his nails into his skin.

The attorney glanced at Hopper for a moment, who gave nothing away. "I understand from her statement that Maxine saw most of the incident? Do you know if your father ever hurt her? Did he ever....touch her, that you're aware of?" The attorney quickly added,

and the way his voice dropped, conspiratorially, as if Billy's family was even more fucked up in reality than on paper.

Billy looked up, jarred by the question. He opened his mouth and then closed it as the thought literally bounced around in his head. "I--no . No. Fuck no. I wouldn't--I was enough for him. Being there was enough for him not to. He just used me for a punching bag. It never went to her." Sure, they hadn't had the strongest relationship, but if Billy had seen his hands on her... he stared at his hands as fury bubbled through his blood.

"Hey, Billy, *Billy* , it's okay, that's why we're here--right Sheriff?" He gently pushed a small floral box of tissues in Billy's direction and a passing police officer gave Billy a once over as he strode across the room. It wasn't just Hopper, or the attorney, it was everybody hearing his business, hearing what happened. "Okay Billy, can you tell me, and I want you to be completely honest because it's important: can you tell me if you fear for your own personal safety if we don't get this restraining order?" He looked at Billy intently. Hopper stiffened a little beside him and wished he could say something, anything, but when Hopper looked over, Billy looked like he was barely hanging on by a thread.

And then, quietly, but cutting through all the noise around him, there was his father's voice, asking where courtroom 2 was.

Billy opened his mouth to speak, to respond, to admit that he was fucking terrified, and then he heard Neil's voice. His eyes widened and he blanched. It didn't matter if they were in a courtroom. It didn't matter if the sheriff was setting next to him. The panic clawed at him as he tried to breathe, tried to resist the urge to turn and look, to see the man who fucked up his face and cut his fucking hair off. He swallowed several times, not even realizing at that point that his chest was heaving a bit.

"Pretty sure he's going to kill me," Billy finally managed, but it was so quiet that he almost didn't even hear himself. He was a child again and Neil was there and *fuck this* . He wanted to bolt, his legs bouncing, his eyes a bit frantic.

"Alright, it's okay Billy, just take your time, hm? I'm going to see if

we're all ready." The attorney rose and walked behind Billy, when Hopper turned his head, he could see Neil Hargrove sitting outside on the bench. His gaze locked onto Billy's back, even though he wouldn't be able to hear them from this distance. 'Shit.'

Hopper turned towards Billy and very hesitantly touched his knee with his hand. Hopper didn't let his touch linger, but he still felt the kid jump when he touched him. "You're doing really good, kid, you are. He's not going to lay a hand on you, alright? You have my word." Hopper's voice was low, low enough so that only Billy could hear it. "Do...you want me to call the school and get Harrington?"

Billy felt a burn begin to crawl over his body as the panic started to dim the edges of his vision. He swallowed again and breathed in slowly through his nose. He just had to keep breathing and focusing. Breathing and focusing. He finally looked at Hopper, his eyes wet and his heart racing. "No, no. Please, don't. I'm okay. I got this."

Hopper nodded slowly and he was about to say something else when he heard the attorney behind him, "Hop, Judge Colloway is ready." Hopper didn't seem all that pleased with the nickname from this man, but he rose up nevertheless. "C'mon kid. We'll get this over with and you can start to get rid of the asshole for the rest of your life." Hopper said loudly, loud enough for Neil Hargrove to hear him, to know what Hopper thought of him.

Billy stood up slowly, glad that his legs didn't feel fucking useless like he did. He glanced at Hopper at the comment and then glanced back at Neil. He almost froze in his steps, almost did the exact thing he always did when Neil looked at him. He stared for a moment before looking away and followed Hopper. He kept his lips pressed into a thin line and tried to think about after this. Steve would be home eventually. He could see him. It'd be okay.

It was quiet walk to the courtroom but Neil's footsteps were behind Billy, the heavy staccato of Neil's boots on the white tiled floor. Billy could even hear Susan then, even if he hadn't seen her the when he had come out of the room. The attorney was there and gently ushered Billy to a chair at a table to his right and Billy could hear Hopper settle in the seat behind him.

Neil stopped for a moment and stood at that table, just looked down at Billy like he was small, like he was the smallest thing Neil Hargrove had ever seen. Neil had always told Billy that family matters were to be discussed within the family, even if discussion was never really actually happened. If Billy backed out of this now, with how Neil looked at him...Neil might actually kill him. This level of disrespect, Neil wouldn't stand for this. Susan stood by Neil and fidgeted, her eyes red-rimmed like she cried nonstop since Billy and Max left, but she said nothing.

"Son." Was Neil's soft rebuke, it was barely louder than a whisper, but it carried the promise of broken bones and pained, pitiful yelps.

A bailiff exited the room behind the Judge's podium, "All rise for the Honorable Judge Colloway." Hopper and the attorney stood automatically as Neil made his way to the table directly across them on the left. Susan settled silently behind him.

Billy had felt mildly better when he got to his seat, but as soon as Neil stood so fucking close to him, his stomach rolled and he wanted to throw up. He stared at the table, his eyes burning as the ringing in his ears began to dim his ability to hear. Fuck Neil. Fuck him. Fuckhimfuckhim. He looked up, finally, staring at his dad as his breath stuttered.

"Neil," Billy replied, but it wasn't smooth. In fact, his voice sort of broke as he said it. He wanted a dad. Hell, didn't every kid? He pressed his lips together. He had just disrespected Neil in a way he hadn't before. Fuck. Him. He stared ahead, ignoring the urge to turn and walk out of the courtroom.

The attorney remained standing, "Your Honor, we're going to call the victim, Billy Hargrove to the stand." He looked down at Billy and motioned for him to follow as he stood next to the bailiff and the witness stand. There weren't many people there, which, was a small miracle, but everybody's eyes were on Billy as he stood. Once again, his father had given him no choice, made even this decision for him. If Billy backed out now, it would be bad, terribly bad for both him and Max. At least with this...maybe Billy stood a chance of making it to his 18th birthday.

The bailiff looked at Billy, like he had seen this thousands of times before. The bruises were still so fresh and everybody could see it, knew that *something* happened. “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

Walking to the stand made Billy physically hurt. Everything ached as he waited for the bailiff to speak. When he did, Billy nodded, then remembered he had to speak. “Yeah. I do.” He muttered. He was looking at everything but Neil again, his hands beginning to shake as he slumped into his seat.

Luckily, the questions were exactly the same as before, just like the attorney had told him. Another small miracle. Neil stared at him the entire time, his gaze fixated on Billy and if they were alone, it was easy to imagine everything that Neil would do to Billy. If there were alone together...Billy would be lucky to end up in a hospital.

And what would Neil do to Steve if he had the chance? The guy that Neil caught him kissing back in California hadn't stood a chance. Neil was a former military man and all muscle, just like Billy. Neil had seen Steve, hell, Steve nearly came after Neil with that bat. If Billy hadn't been hurt, if he hadn't needed to get out of the house, Steve might have been pressed to follow through on his promise. Some of that fire had been there the night of the Byers', but the full intensity of it against Neil, for *Billy*, Steve would have really hurt Neil if he had to.

The judge was listening to Billy intently and took him in, yet another pair of eyes that scrutinized Billy. Knew about his sad life and just how sad it was that his father liked to wale on him. “Now Billy,” the lawyer started, soft, once again like he was just going to break right there, “Can you tell me if you fear for your life if you don't have this restraining order?”

Billy answered the questions and could feel his heartbeat beating against his chest hard enough to make him dizzy. There were a few times that it took him a little longer to answer, a little more time for him to process or respond so that he wouldn't fucking cry in front of everyone in the courtroom. He kept his eyes on the judge or the bailiff, sometimes on his attorney. He tried his best not to look at Neil, because when he did, his whole body felt like it was on fire and

he shrank into the chair.

Finally, when the lawyer asked about him fearing for his life, Billy wanted to throw up. Yes, the fuck he did. Did no one else see the way Neil was looking at him? Was it just Billy who saw it? Was he just seeing shit? His mouth went dry as he looked from the attorney to Neil.

“Y-yes,” Billy hated the way Neil’s voice began calling him slurs in his head. Pussy being one of the biggest ones. Men didn’t cry. Men didn’t ask for help. Men didn’t *fear*, and god, did Billy fear.

It was hard not to think that ultimately Billy brought all of this on himself. Neil didn’t treat Susan that way, didn’t treat Max that way. It was always just Billy. Neil didn’t move, didn’t even blink as he just sat there, stone faced and looking at Billy as if none of this bothered him.

The attorney gave a small smile, “Thank you Billy, you can step down now.” The judge looked up from his notes, looked upon Neil in a similar, unblinking manner. Hawkins may be a small town, but it wasn’t a stranger to the trappings of American family life and abuse.

Billy sat there for a few moments, seeming to gather enough energy to just stand. He wobbled at first and then walked to his seat. His eyes flickered to Neil, but only for a second. He slumped down into his chair and stared at the table. He had thought, going in, that he was going to be disconnected--not care--but obviously the trauma ran deeper than he thought, and it was seriously fucking with him. Billy had been convinced that his dad was going to kill him, so he guessed it was reasonable that he barely handled being in front of the guy.

“I need a cigarette,” Billy muttered to no one, his voice weak and desperate.

Hopper leaned forward once and gently clasped his hand on Billy’s shoulder, only for a second or two, but he was still there. Billy had gotten through it. The judge spoke slowly as he looked Neil over, seemingly assessing whether or not he actually did any of the things that Billy said. “Mr. Hargrove, do you have anything to say before I issue my ruling?”

Neil could have said anything really, because despite the fact that they were in public, he always seemed to hate Billy more than he cared about anything else--including public appearances. He had a way of twisting things, and it was always Billy's fault. He was just disciplining Billy. He was just keeping Billy in line. Billy had done something he shouldn't have.

But Neil was silent for several long moments and folded his arms over his chest. "I don't *care* what happens to him, I'm more than happy to have him out of my life. He's nearly 18 and I've done my best trying to raise him, but you can't change a person's *nature*. I'm only here to ask that you see it fit to allow Maxine to come back to us."

Billy closed his eyes as Neil spoke. A tremor moved through his body, despite Hopper's hand on his shoulder, and he dug his fingers into his knees. His *nature*? What the fuck was his nature? That he liked guys more than girls? That he preferred one sex over the other? How was that any sort of excuse or validation for nearly beating him to death once? How did that make the fact that they had to *stitch his ear* okay? How could Neil hate him so fucking much?

The wetness on Billy's cheeks startled him and he swiped the tears away quickly. When he opened his eyes, he looked over at Neil, over at Susan (who he could care less about). Fear settled into the depths of his body as he realized how sane Neil sounded. How father-like when he referenced Max--how his tone changed.

Steve had only known Billy for so long. He may not believe he was trash, but the guy who gave him life, who raised him, sat there and acted as if Billy being alive was some sort of offense. He looked back at the table and clenched his jaw. He welcomed the pain that brought and shuddered. He was hoping the judge would rule against him. He was fucking *praying* and he never did that.

The judge looked steadily at Neil, at his dismissal of Billy. He glanced back at Billy once before directing his attention back to Neil. "Fine, since we're all in agreement here, I see no reason not to issue a temporary protection order. We're going to leave it at six months....and see if the Court feels differently then. Sheriff Hopper can help the boy get his things out. As for the girl," the judge looked down at his papers, "Maxine, it's my understanding that she fired a

shot at you, Mr. Hargrove. To get you off your boy.” Neil shifted in his seat a little, and for once maybe Neil seemed a little uncomfortable. Max was the good child, the normal child.

“I don’t think it’s in Maxine’s best interests to be at the home right now. But I also understand she hasn’t been physically touched in any way. So we will revisit Maxine in the household in 2 months time.” Colloway cleared his throat, “Hopper, where are Child Protective Services?”

Hopper rose and reached out, once again touched Billy’s shoulder and squeezed it softly. He left his hand there as he spoke, “Both of them are staying with a family friend for the time being.”

Neil’s face twisted for a moment and his voice was low, dangerous, “That *faggot* isn’t a friend of this family.” It was silent in the courtroom and for several moments, nobody spoke, nobody moved.

The judge cleared his throat uncomfortably and began to speak before Hopper interrupted, “The girl can stay with me. The boy’s old enough to decide for himself, but you’re going to vouch for me, right John?”

The judge dropped his pen in frustration and reached up to pinch his brow, “Yeah, yeah Hopper. Just two months though, and her mother is going to get visitation rights in a month’s time We’ll let cooler heads prevail.” Susan let out a harsh sob then, it was easy to forget she was there, that she had thoughts of her own, but she let out a shuddering, quiet wail of thanks to the judge.

Billy almost got out of his seat, and wasn’t that a fucking joke? He couldn’t handle Neil’s shit toward him. He couldn’t handle how he looked at him, and he became a fucking *child* when Neil hit him, but the way he said ‘faggot’ in reference to Steve had him vibrating with so much anger that he couldn’t see straight.

“Funny, that,” Billy sneered, glancing over at Neil, “‘Cause *no one* is friends with *your* family. You’re just fucking pissed because he was able to one-up you.” He grinned, all teeth, and managed to keep himself in his seat, despite the urge to get up and snarl in Neil’s face.

Unexpectedly, Billy didn't object to the word 'faggot'. He just pretended it wasn't said. He'd clutch Steve later and try not to heave. Right now, he was using anger to prevent his panic.

The bailiff stepped forward and wordlessly stood before both of the desks when the gavel rang out and the judge snapped, glared at Hopper, "Are we done here yet, Hopper? Take the kid out. I'm not dealing with some brawl in the goddamn courtroom." Hopper squeezed Billy's shoulder a little, tried to gently urge him forward. "We're fine, John. Move it kid, *now*."

Neil stared back at Billy, his face expressionless but his fists were clenched so hard his knuckles were bone white. How many times had he been hit with those hands? Stared at those hands? Thought it was going to be the final time he saw them, the final time before Neil Hargrove really lost his temper?

Billy finally met Neil's gaze and glowered at him. He didn't look away. He didn't look down. It was strange how, if Steve was involved, suddenly he had balls. The urge to spit at Neil was strong, but he just walked out, vibrating and so full of fucking rage that, as soon as they were out, his legs felt weak. Yet, he also felt that panic again. It crawled into his stomach, tearing at his guts and reached into his chest. He sucked in a sharp breath and fought it, tried to the dimming around the edges of his vision from becoming too much.

Max. He had to pick up Max. She was going to show him something. He had to... He blinked several times and leaned against a wall. Why the fuck was he so weak? One day, he'd be able to think about Neil and not want to throw up.

"Stay here, kid." Hopper pulled Billy to the side, rested his hand on Billy's shoulder before Hopper reached up to his own shoulder and pressed on the com unit. "Yeah, Hargrove is in the building. Let's wrap this up."

It was several minutes before Neil and Susan exited the courtroom. Neil stopped and stared at Billy, as if he hadn't expected him to be there when he left. Susan gaped at Billy, and seemed unsure of herself, unsure of what to say. She had never hurt Billy, but she had seen enough, far more than Max ever did.

Two officers walked down the hall as Hopper stepped away from Billy for a moment. "You know," Hopper sighed, "I probably shouldn't enjoy this, but sometimes, we just have to treat ourselves." Hopper stepped behind Neil and grabbed one of his wrists, jerked it quickly behind his back, "Neil Hargrove, you're under arrest for assault, battery, child endangerment, criminal negligence, and anything else I can fucking think of."

Hopper jerked Neil's other wrist behind him and Neil hissed once, as if Hopper really hurt him. Susan whimpered and covered her mouth, shook her head in disbelief as the two deputies stood behind Neil and urged him forward. Neil didn't walk, he stumbled forward. His boots stuttered on the floor.

Susan stood there in shock a moment and she looked at Billy with tears in her eyes. She glanced down the hall at Neil's disappearing form, the cops reading Neil his rights in a flat affect. She shook her head again and sobbed softly, "I'm sorry, Billy--" But she moved quickly after Neil, half-running down the hall after him, and just like that, they were both gone down a corner, and Billy could hear no more.

Billy wanted to scream. He wanted to slide down the wall and bury his face into his arms. It was a good minute or so before he realized tears were streaming down his face. He was gasping, too, his body trembling with the anxiety of it all as it actually caught up to him. He refused to look at Hopper, staring at the ground (even if he didn't see anything--just wavering wetness).

"I need my car," Billy finally said. "Can we get my car? I have to. I need to pick Max up. I have..." Anything but this. Billy needed something to do, something tangible and less emotionally driven. Susan shouldn't have apologized. She can't *apologize* after watching what Neil did to him. She did *nothing*. He shook his head and pushed himself off the wall, and even though he just wanted to crawl into bed and pass out, he started walking toward the exit of the building, fully intending to pick Max up and figure out what the hell Steve was hiding.

Hopper frowned but nodded. "Sure, kid, we can do that. Just follow me. You....sure you don't want me to call anybody?" The implication

was of course Steve, since Hopper knew about them. They walked slowly to Hopper's SUV outside. Hopper was a little worried Billy might pass out on him, that maybe it was too much for him. He was still surprised that the kid held up as well as he did, given everything that happened. And Hopper felt a great deal of satisfaction arresting the bastard. He'd be out on bail soon, but if nothing else, fucking with Neil Hargrove might become a new hobby for him.

Hopper opened the door and placed his hand on Billy's shoulder. "You did good, Billy, really. Colloay isn't going to send you back and....we'll figure out what to do with Max. Two months is a long time."

Billy walked in front of Hopper for just a moment before slowing down enough that they were walking together. He bit his lower lip until they reached the car and then shuddered. "She can't... Hopper, I've never *not* been there to be his punching bag. Susan is fucking useless. I don't... Max..." He trailed off and then swallowed. "I don't want Max there with him. I just don't know who the next person is that he'll choose..."

Billy wasn't there to take the blows, as if that had been his damned job. He shook his head and climbed into the truck. "Let's go. Let's just get my car. I need to get Max and I can... I need a break."

Hopper nodded solemnly, opted to let Billy have this time for himself as he went around to his side. He got into the truck and glanced over at Billy. "It's okay to not be okay, kid, just remember that." Hopper started the car and eased into drive. He was sure Harrington would have preferred a call, but somebody had to look out for what Billy wanted here, and Hopper knew all too well what the kid was going through.

His voice was a little gruff as he focused on the road. "I can pick up Max tomorrow night, and you can see her whenever you want. I'm not just going to let her go back to that. I don't know you that well, Hargrove, but I want you to believe that. I'm not going to screw you over on this."

Billy sank against the seat and tipped his head back. His breathing still stuttered, but he wasn't panicking as badly at least. The dimming

around his vision stopped, and so had the ringing in his ears. He breathed in slowly, slowly tapered off so that he could think straight. Once he felt slightly better, he tilted his head to look out the window and let his shoulders sag.

“Thanks,” was all Billy said. He felt detached, finally. His emotions had tumbled off a damned cliff, and he let them, enjoying the numbness that it left behind. Of course, it wasn’t healthy, but Billy needed to cope. He needed to function and Max needed to be picked up. They were going to go wherever the fuck and Billy needed to be aware for that (even if he was emotionally stunted at the time).

“...Of course, kid.” Hopper’s reply was soft, didn’t betray his own emotions, but reflected everything that happened, his involvement, it was more than just because it was his job. They arrived at the house relatively quickly. Neil’s truck wasn’t there of course, and Susan would’ve follow him down to the station when he was booked.

It was quiet in the car and the Hargrove house seemed so small compared to Steve’s. “Are you going to be okay to drive, Billy? Do you...want to try to get some of your things now? I can stick around.” Neil wouldn’t be back, but Hopper wanted to offer his presence as some sort of security.

Billy stared at the house and felt that same fucking panic try to tear him apart again. He shook his head, and it was a sharp movement. “No, no. I just want my keys.” Nothing there was worth sticking around. He could always replace the shit in his room. He got out of the truck and wandered up the front door. He reached up, picked the spare key he kept above the windowsill. After unlocking the door, he pushed it open and tried not to panic again. The blood was at least cleaned up (Susan, probably. Neil didn’t do a *woman’s* work). He glanced around until he found the keys sitting on the side table. He reached over and snagged them.

After looking around one last time, Billy hesitated. This had never been home for him. He didn’t remember the last time he thought of somewhere as being home. His stomach turned and he stepped out again. He pocketed the key to the house and shut the screen door. If Max needed something, he’d have the key, at least. When he looked at Hopper’s truck and nodded before wandering to the Camaro.

When Billy got in, the soft leather felt familiar. The car roared to life and he shuddered. He could do this. He tilted his head back and sighed. Max. He needed to go to Max. He yanked his car in reverse and got the fuck out of the driveway. He roared past Hopper, concentrating on getting Max. Just needed Max to show him this shit and then he could just be *fine* .

It was strange, the idea that Neil would be gone from his life forever. It wasn't as if Billy loved him, it was just that Neil was this overwhelming and threatening constant in his life--something that invaded his being when Neil chose to insult him, to withhold, or beat him. Neil probably wouldn't stay long in jail, Susan would bail him out as fast as she could. But none of that meant that they ever had to see each other again. Neil would never care about him, never treat him like a father should treat his son. That wasn't ever going to be possible, due to Billy's *nature* .

It was 15 minutes until 3 P.M. when Max's school was finally in the distance. She wouldn't have told her little nerd friends what was happening, not yet anyway. Max hated being pitied, hated help just as much as Billy. She preferred to find what she enjoyed in life, it was just that Neil and Susan allowed Max the freedom to gravitate towards her interests.

When Billy tore into the parking lot, he felt a little more like himself. Granted, his emotions were completely off, but the adrenaline was still there when the tires squealed. He threw it in park and tossed the door open. When he got out, he lit up (seriously, he had gone down on his cigarette intake and he wondered why the fuck that was a good idea).

Billy pulled on the cigarette and leaned against his car, ignoring the way his body protested. He hadn't taken any medicine before court. He didn't want to risk being out of it, being unreachable. His eyes closed as he breathed in, enjoying the way the smoke reached the depth of his lungs and then seeped out of his nose. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at the school.

The kids there probably had normal families, normal and boring lives. There were a few excited screams when the bell finally rang. Max deserved something normal, something Billy couldn't really

provide at the moment. She wanted Billy to be her brother, wanted them to be close. It seemed just as impossible as Neil loving his son.

After about five minutes, she raced out, smiling with Lucas and Dustin in tow. They were all excitedly talking about something. It would take time for Steve to get here, but there was an increased risk the longer Billy stayed. If Steve saw him, he would know. He would see it on Billy's face and maybe he would finally break.

She yelled something at Dustin when she spotted Billy against his car, picking him up just like any other day. The other kids noticed him too, knew he should be at school still, just getting out himself. She spoke to the boys quietly and tucked some of her hair behind her ear. She knew Billy had gone to court that day, but didn't know what would happen to her, if she would...end up in foster care.

She adjusted her backpack and strode towards Billy as confidently as she should muster. Max looked up at him and bit her lower lip. She softly asked, "Is it done...?"

"In the car," Billy replied stiffly. When they both climbed in, his breath came out in a ragged sigh and he gripped his steering wheel. He wrung his hands around the thing and then chewed on the inside of his cheek. "You'll be living with Hopper, starting tomorrow. Two months. Susan gets visitation, and at the two month mark, they make another decision on if you can stay at the house." As he spoke, his words were becoming more and more strained, as if he hated the thought of her going back.

Billy did.

"I'm... on my own, I guess?" Billy shrugged and then pulled the car in reverse. "So, brat, where we headed to? I remember you telling me something about wanting to show me what the fuck is going on with Steve?" He pulled his car out of the lot and headed to the road.

But Max was quiet for a long time, her head bowed down as she pulled at her shirt. She didn't answer Billy's question. Instead her voice was small, and for once, she sounded like the young girl she actually was, "So you are I aren't going to live together?"

She glanced up once at Billy and her eyes were already watering. She had pushed her mother away, *wanted that for Billy* , but now he was going to be gone too, and she would just be alone. "I don't know if I can....why can't I stay with you and Steve? I won't--" She wanted to say that she wouldn't bother them, wouldn't even tease them really, but the prospect of being away from Billy made her feel sick to her stomach.

"Shit, Max," Billy looked over and winced at the sight of her tears. Shit. He pulled the Camaro off of the road, letting his tires eat gravel. As he parked, he slouched into his seat and ran his palm over his face. "I'm sorry, Max. But... Hopper should let you see us. I can pick you up and drop you off still. I can still take you to the arcade and you can hang out with us until you have to go back. I know... I get that this is hard, but..."

But what? It was going to be okay? Like fuck it would. It wasn't going to be. He groaned and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Max." *I fucked up. I fucked up your life* . He grit his teeth and then sighed again. "Do... you wanna go get ice cream or some shit? Forget about whatever you wanna show me?" He had to deal with what was in front of him now. Steve had issues, yeah, but they could work on them. But he had Max sitting in his passenger seat, fucking lost and in tears, and he had no idea how to comfort her.

"Ice cream? Why the hell would I--" She swiped angrily at her face and looked down at her lap. She was silent for several moments before she whispered, choking on her words, "I don't want to go back again. Every time I see him, I'll just think--" She turned her gaze to Billy then and swallowed hard. "They always talk about this crap at school, I should have known, I was *stupid* and mad at you, but I saw--"

She didn't even know what to say but sorry. It wasn't enough, it was never going to be enough. She bit her lower lip, her voice quiet and she gave a little laugh as if it didn't matter, "Maybe I should have just shot him, right? Would have solved a lot." Her smile faded quickly when Max's eyes glistened as she looked at him, blinked several times as tears began to fall down her cheeks.

Billy tapped his fingers against his steering wheel, his heart pounding

against his chest. He needed to relax, but Max was putting him on edge again. He sucked a breath in through his teeth and shifted. It was becoming harder not to be restless, not to feel that familiar panic clawing at him. His eyes flickered around the car--the road, the sky, the grass and trees. When he finally looked at Max, he frowned.

"Max... It's not your fault," Billy hesitated and then reached out to swipe a few tears from her cheeks. "It's not your fault, kiddo. It was happening and I was pretty fuckin' good at hiding it. I just happened to piss him off a little too much that night." He put his car in first and then pulled back onto the road. "Just. Max, it's not your fault, okay? Do you understand me?" He looked over to her as he drove toward Steve's house.

She was quiet for several long moments and when they reached the house, she didn't get out of the car. Steve's beamer wasn't there, he would still be at school or with the other kids right now. "Billy...if it's not my fault, then it's not yours either. Don't say that about him, I saw what he did. You didn't deserve that, even with everything you do, you didn't...."

Max looked down again and glanced at the skateboard that Billy had given her. He had broke it, but the duct tape worked surprisingly well. It wobbled just a little on sharp turns, but otherwise it was fine. "If I tell you, everybody's gonna be really mad at me. Lucas told me that...people could hurt us." Max looked back up at Billy, searched his face. "I just want you to happy, and if understanding Steve *helps* you--then...then they can be mad at me."

Billy looked down at Max while he sat in the driveway. He glanced at the house and rolled his lower lip between his teeth. He was getting a lot of anxious habits, and he hated it. He dropped his hands in his lap and worked his jaw. Years and years of abuse couldn't budge what he felt. Not right now. He felt at fault for everything, and he believed it was rightfully so. Maybe one day he would feel different, but not right now.

"You'll break their trust, and that shit... It's hard to get it back," Billy chewed at the inside of his cheek. "No, Max. I think I'll wait for Harrington to tell me. If he ever will. Or show me. Fuck. I don't know. I've fucked shit up enough. The least I can do is keep you in

good graces with your nerd friends.” He pushed the Camaro door open and pulled himself out.

For once, Billy felt like he was making the right move for Max.

Max hesitantly got out of the car with Billy, cradling her skateboard and her backpack as they headed into the house. Steve didn’t even bother to lock it, but it was Hawkins. Who was going to come to Steve’s house and rob him? She went into the kitchen and grabbed a banana and some peanut butter. Steve had told her that morning that he was going to get more food, maybe make her something that she wanted. He had said it with a grimace on his face and Max got the impression Steve wasn’t the best cook.

She felt torn, she didn’t want to upset the Party, but she also didn’t want to watch Steve freak out like that again. Billy was...Billy. Even sometimes she felt that anger deep inside of her when Lucas or Dustin needled at her. It was going to happen again. Maybe Billy could fix it, but maybe he couldn’t.

She ate slowly, glanced over at Billy when he sat down at the kitchen table. Steve would be home soon enough. They would all have time together like they did the past two nights, and Max...had really liked that. Billy was happier even than when he was in California. But right now he just looked so exhausted, and she just could feel that Billy was going to screw things up. Not intentionally, but Billy didn’t *know* how to be happy. Billy was still trying to protect her, and she would let him have that, but she also wasn’t going to give Billy the opportunity to fuck up.

She kept her gaze on the table, didn’t dare look up Billy as she whispered, “He protected me. Didn’t let it....it’s there now. We put it in a trunk on the bus at the junkyard. Hawkins isn’t what you think, Billy. It isn’t at all.” Max got up from the table, the chair’s legs squeaked on the floor and she gave him one hard stare before she silently padded into the living room.

Billy paused and looked up. He had been staring at the table, lost in his fucking thoughts when Max spoke up. He stared at her, confused as fuck for a moment, before it clicked. She was giving him information. Leading him to what she wanted him to see without

actually doing so. It sort of gave her an out and him a way to figure shit out. When she padded into the living room, he stood from his chair and held the keys to his Camaro tightly.

“I’ll be out for a while,” Billy called, but he knew she knew. He knew she did that purposely. “Don’t make a mess. Harrington will have a stroke.” He shook his head at that and left.

The drive to the junkyard was boring. Hell, Billy doubted he would fucking find anything. This shit town was the least exciting place on Earth, so as he climbed into the bus, ready to just have this over with, he scrunched his nose up at the smell. Something was definitely dead.

The trunk was in the back, but it wasn’t sealed. Probably had nothing to seal it with. When he got to the back, he leaned against one of the broken seats and tapped it with his foot. When nothing happened, he sighed and pulled the damn thing open.

It was rotting. Somewhat. But it wasn’t something he had ever seen. The flesh oozed and the skeleton was sticking out in places, and Billy was suddenly stumbling to the side and throwing up. Thank fuck Max wasn’t actually here to see anything. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked into the trunk again.

That shit. That was *not fucking normal* .

It didn’t move and that’s the way that Billy knew it was dead. That smell was associated with death, but that *thing* wasn’t associated with anything alive. Its mouth opened when Billy kicked the trunk, but it was just settling inside the trunk. Its mouth, or face, had these tentacles covering the inner part of its mouth, which was surrounded by rows and rows of teeth. They jutted out like red membrane there like thick hairs of teeth. *It tore her apart.*

It was wrapped in a blanket and there was some slime congealed around it, cocooning it inside the trunk. One of it’s limbs stuck out from the blanket. It had these fingers, thick and curved into claws. Whatever it was, it wasn’t something that people knew about. It was an entirely new creature and when one looked at it, you felt deep inside you, inside your primordial self, that it would murder you if it

could-- *really easily* .

It had come after Max. It had come after Steve. *He protected me* .

What any of this had to do with Steve's pool, with those lights--none of that made sense, but even with this proof in front of him, this didn't make any fucking sense either. Is this what Steve saw in his dreams? What he looked for in the woods just beyond the pool?

Fighting the urge to throw up again, Billy left the bus and stumbled over to his car. He leaned against the driver side door and breathed in through his nose, doing his best to not vomit. He blew out a harsh breath and rubbed his face, not giving a fuck if it hurt. Eventually, after he could somewhat think again, he sank into his car and turned the engine over.

Everything sort of hit him, then. Court. Neil. Max. Steve. That *thing* . Billy almost screamed, *almost* , but instead shoved his foot in gas pedal, the other releasing the clutch. The tires spat out gravel before the Camaro bolted forward, and he was trying his fucking best to just deal with everything in his head as he drove in the direction of Steve's house.

It was too much. It was too much and Billy felt himself closing off, felt the walls clicking in place as he tried to logically think through whatever the fuck was happening.

Fuck, Billy didn't even know how he got to Steve's driveway. One minute, he was staring at a corpse in the junkyard, and the next, he was shaking in his car in front of Harrington's house. He had to calm down--he had to think.

Steve said he almost died several times .

And Billy began to hyperventilate as his hands gripped the steering wheel.

14. Chapter 14

Summary for the Chapter:

Now that Billy knows about the demodogs, he's going to have a lot of questions!

Smut to follow in the next chapter (it tends to be our pattern after angst).

The lights were on inside the house. Steve always seemed to have the lights on. All of these secrets no longer fucking secret. What the hell had it been? Where the hell did it come from? How long had Max known about all of this, and who else, besides her and Steve, knew about it?

Steve's car was in the driveway. Steve was home, he was home, and Steve was with Max. It had all those teeth, how the hell was it possible to have teeth like that? Was it a new species? It was this insane rush of thoughts and questions.

And then suddenly there was a soft knock on Billy's car door window.

The knock on his window made him flinch. It brought him back enough, but he hadn't even realized that he was dizzy (lack of oxygen, he guessed). He blinked several times and then let out a harsh breath. He needed to get out of the car. He needed to get up. Slowly, because everything *ached*, Billy let go of the wheel and pulled the handle to his door. He pushed it open, but didn't move yet. He didn't for a few moments, actually, trying to control the rapid breathing in his lungs.

The idea that those things had attacked Steve, had attacked Max, and that probably stupid group of nerds he had come to like made his skin crawl. Then there was Neil. Billy also had to face school soon, and he wasn't even sure he could.

After what seemed like hours, even though it was less than a few minutes, Billy pushed himself out of his car. He swayed a moment and then slid the door shut. He could do this. He could act like he

was completely fine--just like always had before. All he had to do was kick everything to the side and *not let it consume him* .

Steve frowned deeply as he watched Billy, of course he knew that Billy had been to court and he suspected it was going to be extremely tough on him, but the guy really looked like he had been through the wringer and it made Steve's heart clench just to look at him. He placed his hand gently on top of Billy's.

Max wouldn't have told Steve what she did, send Steve into another meltdown, and it was obvious when Steve touched him that he had no idea what Billy had seen or done. "Hey, I'm making some dinner, Max told me she's going to Hopper's tomorrow." So at least they didn't have to have that conversation.

All Steve knew about Billy was he was "on his own." Whatever the hell that meant. Right now he wasn't going to press Billy. Steve reached out and cupped Billy's jaw, leaned forward and gently pressed their foreheads together. Steve smiled for Billy, it would be difficult, but he would help him, "Together...right?"

As soon as Steve touched him, Billy's world felt like it was crashing down. Steve was *alive* . He was touching him and alive and *not* dead, like he had said he had been so close to so many times before. He shuddered and, uncharacteristically for Billy, wrapped his arms around Steve and pulled him forward. He held onto him, tightly, his eyes shut tightly as his thoughts ran rampant.

Everything would have been different if Steve had died. Fuck, Max could have died, too, and that thought just amplified Billy's panic. He dug his fingers into Steve and swallowed. Finally, because Billy had been shaking too much to respond, he nodded his head and opened his eyes to look at Steve.

"Steve... I..." Should he tell him? Should he say anything? Fuck. Everything was fucked up, anyway, right? "I saw it, Steve. I fucking saw it and I know..." He looked away from Steve and he knew it was because of the guilt that he *knew* .

Steve exhaled in surprise when Billy pulled him forward, but he returned the embrace and gently rubbed his back. He thought it was

all from the day, the stress. actually confronting Neil, and ultimately the release that came from being out of danger, but when Billy spoke, Steve stiffened and jerked his upper body back slightly to look at Billy's face.

"What are you talking about, *what* did you see?" Steve's heart started to race, not that, that wasn't really possible, El had closed the Upside-Down. His grip tightened on Billy's arm, "Billy, tell me what you saw."

Billy glanced at Steve and then clenched his jaw as Steve tightened his grip on his arm. He breathed in heavily through his nose and didn't want to admit that he was panicked. He was scared of losing Steve. He shouldn't have said shit, but he did, and he had to respond because if he didn't, it would just get worse.

"That...I saw that dead--fucking creature thing--in the bus," Billy swallowed down the bile in his throat and clenched his hands. "I connected the dots, Steve. I... I know you didn't want me to, but I had to. I had to understand. I was tired of feeling so fucking lost."

"What-no, no, no—how did you, we put it on the bus—" Steve shook his head in disbelief and closed his eyes tightly, this wasn't fucking happening. This was a dream and he was going to wake up and he would be next to Billy and it would just be nice, just *nice* .

Why the fuck couldn't they just have nice? What the fuck did Steve do so goddamn wrong in his life that this kept coming back? Steve sharply pulled away for a moment and tore his hands through his hair, "FUCK!!" Steve tugged hard on his hair and shook his head quickly as his heart began to race again. He expected helping Billy today, he expected talking to him about bullshit so Billy could try to forget, he expected *helping* , not being reduced to this shit. How the fuck could Billy have found it? What the hell was he doing in the junkyard--none of it made sense! Steve couldn't just talk about this, couldn't drag Billy into all of this pain. Billy didn't fucking deserve all that too. Wasn't Steve enough to deal with on his own? Steve was breathing harder as he looked at Billy, ready to snap, and the blonde just looked so *lost* that it felt physically painful to be angry.

"Steve, *please* ," Billy reached out and then hesitated. He dropped his

arms to the side, as if he was either terrified of touching Steve or uncertain if he *could* . Instead, he tugged at his jacket, needing something to do with his hands. “I know--I know you didn’t want me to know. But now I do and you can just *tell me* and not feel fucking guilty for it. I just. If I’m going... If we’re going to be together, I have to know. I can’t be hidden in the dark and just pretend everything is okay.”

Tears stung Billy’s eyes and he stared at the ground. “You get to see the really fucked up part of my life. You know my nightmares. You know why I fight and why I snap. I--I wanted... I wanted to be there for you, like you are for me. I just... I wanted to *understand* ...”

Billy was raw and open and it made Steve *ache* . He had never considered ending it with Billy, it wasn’t like that. It was about Billy getting *hurt* , it was about *watching* him hurt. But of course, Billy was hurting now, really fucking hurting, and confused as hell. And Steve thought about the first time he saw that thing, when he swing his bat, thought it was just some insane man for a moment—because that couldn’t be real.

But there he was and now, there Billy was. Steve exhaled loudly as he looked over Billy, he was gonna keep his shit together. Steve wasn’t going to run, it happened, and now he needed to address it. He took a step towards Billy and took his hand, interlocked their fingers, and squeezed hard. “I’m not...I’m not mad at you, Billy, I’m not.”

For a moment, Billy forgot how to breathe. Steve’s hand was in his and after the day he had, his fear of losing Steve as palpable. He tightened his fingers around Steve’s, holding onto him with a grip that he hadn’t used before. “I saw it,” he finally said, “I saw it and thought about how you said--how you almost--” his breathing was becoming erratic again and, perhaps, Billy had put a little too much on his plate that day.

“It terrified me,” Billy hesitated. “More... more than being in the courtroom with Neil. More than talking about what he’s done to me. It *terrified* me, Steve. I can’t...” It was pretty clear what Billy was saying. He couldn’t lose Steve. Steve was what he had left after Max, and Max was going to live with Hopper. If he lost Steve, where the fuck would he go? What would he do?

"I get it now, though. The bats." Billy looked toward the backyard. That was still a mystery, but he was too fucking full. He needed to take his medication and he needed to fucking lie down. But here he was, leaning against his Camaro and acting like one of those... He closed his eyes and pushed that down. He was trying to not refer to himself how his dad did. It was hard.

Steve's eyes widened as he took Billy in and exhaled sharply. His heart pounded and he could *hear* it, could hear what Billy wanted to say, and even if he wouldn't follow through, that was more than enough for Steve. "Hey, hey—" Steve stepped into Billy's space and wrapped his arms tightly around Billy. "It's going to be okay, I mean this is fucked up, but we will...still *together* , okay?"

Steve barely pulled back to kiss Billy deeply, it wasn't passionate in a sexual sense, but to reassure Billy that even if everything else changed, they wouldn't. "We're gonna have dinner. And you are going to relax. And we will talk, and I will...fucking tell you everything you wanna know."

Billy felt infinitely better as Steve stepped up to him and he was pulled into his arms. He shuddered and hated himself for a moment. He had kept control of his emotions for so long. He had been able to just laugh things off--to brush them off his shoulder--and here he was, on the verge of tears because everything was so fucked up and he just wanted someone to hold onto. It was pathetic, but he couldn't squash it down like he normally did.

"Okay. Okay," Billy nodded and pushed himself off the Camaro. He still held Steve's hand tightly as he walked toward the door. He wanted to go inside. He wanted to do whatever Steve wanted him to do because he was far too exhausted to actually function. And he had seen Steve boss around the kids, so it wasn't like he *couldn't* tell Billy what to do. Billy just usually didn't--but right now, he seemed pliable.

They walked together and passed Max in the living room. She made eye contact with Billy and looked guilty, she had known what Billy would see, how he would have to come to terms with it. None of it made sense. *Hawkins isn't what you think* .

Steve held his hand as they went into the kitchen, turned off the stove, and set him down in a chair. He immediately wrapped his arms around Billy's shoulders from behind. Steve was going to be strong for Billy, all of this was going to freak him the fuck out and unfortunately for Billy, he was going to have to rely on Steve for help. He kissed his head softly, just wanted Billy to *feel* that he was there.

Billy settled into the chair and then held his breath as Steve's arms wrapped around his shoulders. He tilted his head back so his head rest on Steve's chest. He looked up at him, watching, waiting. He wasn't sure what to say or what to ask. He didn't want to pry more out of Steve than what he knew so far. There were things that were definitely not normal going on, and they had attacked Steve and the kids. Apparently, the things had almost killed him.

Dread built in Billy's stomach again and he sighed shakily. Finally, because it was hard to stay quiet, Billy asked one question.

"Are there...are there more of them?"

Steve frowned, it seemed like a simple question, but it wasn't. He tightened his arms around his neck a moment and kissed his head again. "No, but...if you want me to be honest, we will talk more later. But right now, we're okay. I just...just try to relax right now." Nothing would happen that night, he didn't think so anyway. "I am making spaghetti and you are going to hate it."

Steve kissed along his head. He wouldn't be able to hold anything back, and people would be angry, maybe even Dustin. But he couldn't keep Billy in the dark now, it just wouldn't be safe. "We'll take it one thing at a time. And...maybe make some more bats."

Billy relaxed at the answer, even though Steve implied there was more shit they needed to talk about. Of course there was. This just seemed like the tip of the iceberg, and Billy wasn't sure how far he was willing to go. At the mention of food, his stomach clenched and Billy realized that perhaps skipping meals that day hadn't been one of his best ideas. Spaghetti or not, anything sounded better than nothing.

“You’ve got a thing for those bats, Steve,” Billy muttered. “That worries me, you know. Getting one of those too close to my balls was definitely not the way to be introduced to them.” He glanced at the table and then paused. Medicine. Right. He rubbed his eyes, though, knowing that if he took the pain medicine, he’d be out of it. Then, he couldn’t talk.

“And how could you possibly mess up spaghetti? You do realize it’s just boiling water and noodles, right?”

“I promise, I am definitely not going to let anybody but me come near your balls, Hargrove,” Steve easily quipped, rested his hand on Billy’s chest. The important thing now was easing the tension, letting Billy feel safe now that one fucking monster was out of his life for the time being.

“And don’t judge my cooking! It’s just more sophisticated and—yeah, sometimes burnt or...undercooked than most people expect. I just have a refined palette and eat a lot of eggs.” Steve leaned to the side with his head tilted down a little as he smiled at Billy. “You’re so lucky to have me, Hargrove, I could be a chef in New York instead of feeding you in Hawkins.”

Billy raised an eyebrow and then scoffed. “Yeah. I’d rather have nothing else but you near them,” he mused, his gaze flickering down to the hand on his chest. He glanced up again and then, finally, felt some of the coiling in his muscles began to relax.

Suddenly, Billy reached up, grasping Steve’s jaw. He looked at him, his blue eyes swimming with some unnamed emotion as he looked at him. “I *am* lucky to have you, Harrington. And not because your cooking is shit.” He let go as quickly as he grabbed, though, and glanced away.

Steve’s eyes widen as Billy spoke fiercely to him and his heart pounded. It was just a small moment, but sometimes the intensity with which Billy spoke—it was something Steve could feel in his bones. He slowly tightened his arms over Billy’s shoulders and rested his head against Billy’s.

“....I know it’s been...insane and short, and this is all happening way

too fast, but....” Steve turned his head against Billy’s cheek and softly spoke, “Me too, Hargrove. I’m lucky to have you too.” Steve kissed along Billy’s face softly, his hand sliding gently down Billy’s chest, under his shirt and over his heart. “Maybe you’re an asshole, but...you’re *my* asshole, Billy.”

Billy chuckled and winced. Ow. He tilted his head and pressed a kiss to Steve’s cheek. “I can agree with that,” he decided, as if he had any choice when it came to Steve. He wouldn’t deny the way his heart stuttered, though, or how his whole body shivered. He sighed slowly and put his hand over Steve’s, over his shirt, squeezing him gently.

Hell. A couple of days ago, Billy would have pummeled Steve into the ground for showing such weird affection toward him. He smirked at the idea and shook his head. “Besides. Being an asshole is my specialty. Can’t just leave it behind.”

“Yeah, it is your dominant personality trait, but I think I like making you a giant dork.” Steve kissed all along Billy’s face teasingly, smiling and laughing softly before he captured Billy’s lips and kissed him sweetly. Steve smiled into the kiss and whispered against his lips, “I’m going to make you eat every bite of that spaghetti.”

Steve pulled back, his eyes searched Billy’s face and Steve actually felt good himself. Billy knew and he would know everything. Now Billy would know why he was a giant mess, but if Billy hasn’t run away from what he had seen yet, maybe Billy was going to stick around after all.

Billy snorted. “If you tell anyone about me knowing that shit with the kids,” he warned, but the threat was empty, his lips in a small smile. Of course, then Steve was kissing him, and Billy was beginning to forget about what they were talking about, anyway. He returned it and then grinned as Steve pulled back.

“If only you were that dominating in other places,” Billy mused to himself and crossed his arms over his chest. His grin widened as he looked over Steve. Hell, he could definitely see Steve telling him what to do behind closed doors. He shifted in his seat and chuckled.

Steve flushed and rolled his eyes a little. “I don’t know Hargrove, I

think I've already one upped you a few times. Apparently you're a sucker for 'pretty boys.'" Steve taunted him a little and pulled back. He turned and sat a little on the table, mirrored Billy's body language and also folded his arms across his chest while he cocked an eyebrow at him.

Steve gave him a little smirk, " So maybe you just haven't seen anything yet."

Billy paused and then blinked. The actual surprise in his face was probably hilarious, but he was actually really fucking intrigued by the turn of events, and whatever Steve was doing was definitely working to distract him from what had happened that day. He felt fucking broken to the core, so being able to be pulled from that was a relief (if only for a little bit).

"Really? I think I'm just a sucker for you, Harrington," Billy murmured. He kept his arms crossed over his chest but spread his thighs. His lips were spreading into that grin he had from before, a quick glimpse of the old Billy Hargrove. "And I'd love to explore what 'I haven't seen yet'." He tilted his head and looked over Steve's body slowly, to make a fucking point. He didn't want to admit that his own cheeks had flushed. Billy was rarely one-upped, to say the least. Not in this manner.

Steve hummed a little and nudged Billy's feet together. He cleared his throat and stood for just a moment before he threw out his leg, straddled Billy, and settled into his lap. He leaned his back against the table though, rested his elbows and gave Billy a smirk.

"Maybe....I like winding you up a bit. I'm not as innocent as you think, Hargrove." Steve reached out as fisted his hand in Billy's collar. He brought the blonde in close, arched his hips up a little against Billy's, "Just because I like what I like doesn't mean you're in charge of everything, blondie."

Billy sucked in a sharp breath when Steve forced his thighs closed. He narrowed his eyes, obviously calculating what Steve had planned before the guy climbed into his lap. A noise almost left him and a flush covered his neck--all the way up to his cheeks. His fingers twitched as he tried to control himself. He *liked* this, and Billy rarely

liked not having control.

Then, Billy *did* grunt as Steve fisted his hand into his shirt and pulled him forward. His breath hitched in his throat and heat swirled into his stomach, especially as Steve pushed his hips down against his own. "Fuck," Billy breathed, itching to grab Steve's hips, to roll his hips up against Steve's and turn the tables on him. Instead, he licked his lips again and looked over Steve's body.

"You gonna show me, then?" Billy asked, and he somewhat hated how interested he sounded--how rough his voice was.

"I don't know, are you going to eat all my spaghetti?" Steve taunted and arched his hips slowly, he was aware that Max could walk in on them any minute now, and he wouldn't take it too far, but distracting and teasing Billy was fun, a *lot* of fun.

Steve pulled him a little closer, held his fist there, and slowly rolled his hips. "What was it you said? That I'd be begging to come? Maybe Hargrove, but even if you're fucking me, I'm going to take *everything* out of you and afterwards, you're going to only *ever* think about me." He bit at Billy's lower lip, sucked hard, but Steve pulled back when Billy actually tried to kiss him, let Billy try to chase his lips. And as quickly as he sat on his lap, Steve stood up. He smirked down at Billy and clapped Billy on the shoulder with a "later," echoing Billy in the shower last night, before he returned to the stove.

Billy's mouth went dry as Steve arched and rolled against him. His cock throbbed in his pants and he felt a little dizzy. He breathed slowly through his nose because that was about all he could do to prevent bending Steve over the damned table and fucking him. He scowled for a moment, obviously frustrated, and hitched his hips up to grind against Steve. He felt fucking breathless, his blood singing, demanding for more, but he sat, listening to Steve and letting those words soak into his brain.

Then Steve had his lower lip, and before he could properly kiss him, he was up and at the stove. Steve. Fucking. Harrington. He hissed out and shifted on the chair. Shit. He had tight pants, and it was obvious that he was hard as a fucking rock. His gaze flickered to Steve and he worked his jaw. Oh. He'd fuck Steve. He flexed his fingers and stood

slowly from his chair. He slid behind Steve, settling his hands on his hips as he watched him mess with the stove.

“I don’t think it matters what you’d do,” Billy murmured, pressing his hips up against Steve, making sure his cock, despite being clothed, was pushing against Steve’s ass. “I’ll probably always think about you, yeah?” He grinned and stepped back.

Steve bit down hard on his lip, unwilling to betray just how much he wanted Billy. They were back to taunting each other, and Steve wasn’t going to lose. He wasn’t some little school boy, and Billy inflamed that desire deep within him. He could still hear the t.v., Max generally left them alone when they were upset. Steve reached back and gently grabbed Billy through his pants, squeezing and palmngly slowly and deliberately.

He looked back at Billy over his shoulder, “No, Hargrove, *just me* .” That small flame of jealousy had always been inside Steve, but the idea of him doing all this for Billy, being with a guy, and even the idea that Billy would consider another person—that drove him crazy. “Tell me it’s just me.”

Billy grunted in surprise when Steve grabbed his cock. His hands flexed and he growled low, ready to just fuck Steve against the counter. If Max wasn’t here, Steve would be fucking wrecked. He rocked his hips forward, into Steve’s hand, and leaned forward to brush his lips over his ear.

“It’s just you, princess,” Billy murmured, but his voice was laced with affection. “Only you. I wouldn’t go to bed with anyone else after having you.” He chuckled, then, and squeezed Steve’s hip. “Why? Possessive of me? ‘Cause no one really wants this, Steve. You’re just weird.”

“As long as I have you, I don’t give a shit what other people think or want.” And then Steve did turn his head then and caught Billy’s gaze before he seized his lips and kissed Billy fiercely. Anybody who didn’t realize just how special Billy was was an idiot. There was just so much there, and sure, it took time and effort, but what Steve got in return was monumental because Billy Hargrove was a rare discovery.

Steve pulled back just a little and looked at Billy's face before he softly said, "Then you're all *mine* ." He kissed him once again, a little sweeter this time before he swatted lightly at Billy's hip. "Either take care of *that* or check on your sister, you're distracting me from my culinary skills." Steve turned back to the stove, a soft smile on his face.

Billy returned the kiss immediately, opening himself up and allowing Steve to take control (just this once, right?). He moaned into Steve's mouth and then shivered as he pulled away. Shit. Was this what he did to other people? Fuck. He licked the taste of Steve off his lips and grinned. "I think I can deal with that. Get 'Steve's Property' tattooed on my body." He laughed lightly, then, and then squeezed Steve's ass.

"Mentioning my sister did it," Billy huffed and kissed Steve's shoulder before taking a good few steps away so he wouldn't get distracted again. "I'll bring her a coke, I guess. She's probably... I dunno. Worried or something." He grabbed a coke from the fridge and a beer for himself before heading toward the living room. He'd rather drink than take the pain medicine. They both did the same thing.

Max looked up at Billy immediately when he came into the living room, she watched him carefully, had seen the look on Billy's face when they came in: Billy had seen it. Her homework was on the coffee table, half done, but she honestly didn't really care. She thought maybe the Sheriff or somebody talked to the school since her teachers had been so nice today.

She spotted the beer and made a little face, "Can you have that with the medicine?" She didn't want to talk about what she knew she would need to, but Billy would have questions. All of it was hard to explain.

"Beer or medication. Not both," Billy shrugged and set the coke down in front of her. He settled onto the couch and cracked the can open. "Never mix drugs and alcohol, kids," He sat in a snobbish tone that he had heard so many fucking times at school. He chuckled, then, and tipped the can up so that half of it drained down his throat.

When Billy pulled it away, he stared at the blank television and squeezed the can. "Max..." He started, then trailed off. He tapped his

heel on the floor. “You could have died, Max,” his voice was quiet but serious, his eyes finally flickering over to her. He took a sip of the beer and clenched his jaw. “I mean. I know I’ve been a dick, but I’d never want you to get... *killed* , Max. That shit...” Fuck. He looked at the television again. Maybe he shouldn’t talk about this right now. He was still overloaded, and perhaps just...getting drunk was a good idea for the night.

Max was silent for several moments, glanced back and forth between Billy and the t.v. “I just...I didn’t believe it at first. Lucas told me and I didn’t...” She looked down at her lap and whispered, “We hid on the bus when they came. I couldn’t even see them at first, and then when they tried to come onto the bus—Steve had the bat and then they ran away.” How many of those things had there been? Steve didn’t seem to think they were all gone.

“And then at the Byers...” So that was why she had been there, the night Steve lied to him, told Billy that Max wasn’t there and he lost control.

Billy slumped back into the couch and downed the other half of the beer. He crushed it in his hand and still avoided looking at Max. He could just imagine the kids on the bus and Steve, being fucking Steve, swinging the bat at those things. Granted, it was somewhat fucking hot. Really hot. But terrifying. He squinted at the wall and tapped his fingers against the can.

“You’ve got a good swinging arm,” Billy mentioned quietly. “And... I didn’t--Lucas...” He blew out a rough sigh and tipped his head back. “Dad’s racist as fuck, Max. I was trying to do what he told me to, and I was... well, I was trying to avoid this.” He gestured at his face and chuckled. “Didn’t fuckin’ work, though, huh?”

“No, it didn’t,” She replied softly. “I...I told Steve that you were going to kill us, if you caught us. He didn’t want us to go, he wanted us to stay *above* until it was all over, but then you came and then...”

None of them considered listening to Steve before Billy arrived, and certainly not when he was actually out of it or in the car. They had all just wanted to do what they could to help, protect El from getting attacked (even if she could defend herself), and both Steve and Billy

got in the way of that. If Billy hadn't come along, they wouldn't have been able to travel to the upside down.

"And I fucked shit up," Billy shrugged and winced. "Yeah, I tend to do that." He hesitated. "Just, hold on. I'll be back." He disappeared, but only for a moment, and came back with another beer. He flopped back onto the couch and stared at the ceiling. He cracked the can open and blew out a harsh breath.

"I don't blame you... for telling them that. I'm not--good, I guess." Billy pursed his lips and took a long swig of the beer. His stomach turned as it sloshed into his gut. "Smart thinkin', though, kid. With the drugs. Shit was hard to get home, though." He chuckled. "Almost passed out a couple times walking home." But she hadn't actually known about Neil beating him that night. He had played it off as the fight between him and Steve, even if the bruises and cuts hadn't come from that.

"No! Billy, I—I wanted to go. I wanted to help save everybody, it was gonna take over everything, maybe the *world* and I—I couldn't just stay behind. You didn't...fuck...anything up but Steve's face. And nothing that's broken forever."

Max fidgeted before she moved and sat next to Billy, their knees touching. "Maybe you weren't good before, but that was because of *him* and you can change. You've been different, better, even more than in California. So I don't—don't give me that shit, Billy."

"You sound like Harrington," Billy glanced over to Max as she sat next to him. He switched the can of beer into his other hand, away from her, and reached up to pat her head. "Look, Max... The attorney asked me--" he hesitated and then frowned. "Neil's never hurt you, right? He's never put a hand on you?" He licked the rim of his can and then dumped a little less than half down his throat. He wanted to get drunk, and the best way to do that was by drinking too much too fast.

"Shit. Still need to replace your board, too," Billy frowned at that, as if the thought just occurred to him. "I will, by the way. I'll get you another one." He swished the liquid in the can.

Max's shocked cry was loud then, "NO!" So loud that both of them could hear Steve ask if they were okay in the other room. Max sighed and yelled back a loud, "FINE."

She looked away, clearly uncomfortable for Billy to ask this question, for Billy to be so concerned. "No, I...he never touched me or hurt me, Billy, I promise, it was only....ever you." Max bit down hard on her lower lip and hugged him, made him stop drinking for a second. "I'm okay, Billy, really, because you were there. I don't know what...he might have done later, if he knew about Lucas, but....I'm okay, and you don't have to replace my board."

Max pulled away slowly, her gaze fixed on Billy, "You're here now and that's what matters. I'm just happy you're not as much of an asshole that I thought. But now you're going to be my big brother right?" She wanted this a long time, Billy and her to be a family. Neil *had* been kind to her, but it was different. And her mother...she would have to think about her another time, when she wasn't still so angry.

Billy had winced at Max's yell and then sighed when Steve called in. He looked down as Max wrapped her arms around him and when his muscles didn't immediately go tawt, he wanted to blame the beer. The truth, though? He was getting used to being touched, and wasn't that a strange concept? He reached up with his free hand patted her head (it was a little awkward).

"I'll replace your board," He stated firmly, and it was final. He smirked at the comment about him being an asshole. "I'm still an ass, Max. Steve... calms me down, I think?" That, and he wasn't looking at the clock or dreading going home. He wasn't waiting to figure out if he had done something, anything, wrong, to earn his dad's fists or his words. Sometimes (most of the time), the words hurt more than the physical blows.

"And, yeah. Yeah, I'm your big brother," Billy grumbled, fiddling with his beer. He wasn't looking at her, then, but the admission had his blood running a little hotter. "Y'know, now I'll have to be extra aggressive with little shits that bother you. I'm going to be the *annoying* older brother."

“Since when have you not been annoying?” Max grumbled, but settled against Billy. After a few minutes, she looked up at him, “So you...saw it. You didn’t get rid of it, right? We wanted to keep it as an insurance policy.” Billy seemed more comfortable now, but he didn’t know the everything yet. She heard Steve scream outside, but they weren’t together long enough for Billy to know everything.

The truth was that she wanted to talk about it. Sometimes she did with the Party but Max had own thoughts and feelings she wasn’t comfortable sharing, because she hadn’t witnessed everything and didn’t know. Billy hadn’t witnessed anything, but she thought he was lucky to not see those things in action, how quickly they moved. It was hard not to have nightmares. Sometimes she would wake up and see if a member of the Party was on the walkie talkie line. There was usually at least one of them.

“Since never,” Billy chuckled and finished off his beer. He set it down and began to enjoy the light buzz his brain was supplying him. He shifted in his seat so he could look at Max. “I didn’t touch it, Max. The thing was disgusting.” He huffed and glanced toward the kitchen. Steve was making food still, but he wondered how he’d feel about him and Max talking about the shit without him.

“What, exactly, did you get yourself into? What were you doing the night I ended up at the Byers?” Billy really shouldn’t talk about it. He just shouldn’t, but fuck, he wanted to know. It didn’t matter if he still felt a mix of emotions from the day he had. Perhaps talking about this shit would be enough to distract him from Neil.

“I just....Steve wanted us to stay back and wait for El and them to close the gate, so more of them couldn’t get out and hurt everybody...but we knew we could help, and we *did*, we found the center so that we could kill them, the demodogs, before they could attack El. That was what was in the trunk.” She said it matter of factly, as if older people didn’t always have the answers, and it had been the kids who saved the Party and the world. But it didn’t really explain much of anything, in fact it raised really more questions as she looked up at Billy.

“But we’re okay now, the gate is closed and it’s just....normal, I guess? I mean, it will be. We haven’t heard anything and Will hasn’t

seen anything.” None of this made any goddamn sense and it seemed like all of them were connected to it somehow. It was hard to believe Steve actually willingly participating in any of this

“I keep hearing about El,” Billy’s brows furrowed and he itched for another beer. He tipped his head back instead and looked at the ceiling. “Who is El? Or is that some off limits shit, too?” Demodogs? Gate? “Wait--a gate? What do you mean, a gate? Like a house gate? Shit, that doesn’t make sense.” Billy wanted to scrub his face with his palms, but he knew better.

Instead, Billy pushed himself up and hesitated. “Gimme a sec, okay? I need another drink.” Because this shit can’t be handled while he was sober. He made his way into the kitchen, and when he saw Steve, his shoulders relaxed. He leaned his hip on the counter and grinned. “Mind if I grab another beer, princess?”

Steve glanced over at him, his brow furrowed. He had been stirring a sauce, of which a great deal bubbled and splattered all over the stove top. Billy had a much stronger tolerance than his own so Steve gave a little nod. “Yeah, this will be ready soon. I’m just....gonna make a salad too, or some shit. Are you guys okay?” Steve looked at Billy again, there was a large wet spot on his sweater. “You don’t need to get drunk, you know.”

Steve wanted to say it wasn’t going to be any easier if he was drunk, and it certainly wasn’t going to make more sense. Steve had plenty of questions that he knew nobody had the answers to. Thoughts like that could keep you up, drive you crazy, and make you question everything you thought you knew. Steve placed a hand on his hip as he looked Billy over, he was okay now, but he just didn’t want Billy to lose control.

Billy watched the concern on Steve’s face and felt himself deflate. He walked over to the table and eased himself into one of the chairs. His hands rest on his knees as he thought about his next move. Sure, he wanted another beer, but he also didn’t want to upset Steve, and maybe getting drunk would do that? He tilted his head and tapped his heel against the ground.

“No. I guess no one *needs* to do anything, Harrington,” Billy frowned

and pulled his lower lip between his teeth. "But I'd like to. It's not like I have shit to do tomorrow." After all, Steve wouldn't let him anywhere near school. He'd insist on recovery, now matter how aggravated Billy got. Of course, he wouldn't admit that he was weary about returning. Hawkins was small, and he knew the story about him in court and his dad going to jail would be all over the place. He'd get those fucking stupid pitying looks and people would be asking questions and--

Billy stared at the floor, not having realized that he was essentially building himself into his own panic. His breathing was a little off already, his stomach tight. How was he ever going to be normal again?

Steve watched Billy then and wondered if maybe he shouldn't have said anything. Hell, maybe he should just allow Billy to drink, he had a shitty day even without dealing with all this. Steve switched the stove off, it's not like he was going to be make that sauce taste better, and went to Billy. Steve sat beside Billy and put his hand on top of his. "It's going to be OK, really, we're going to do this together." Steve looked over Billy's face, tried to convey that everything was gonna be alright and no matter what Billy saw or experienced that day, Steve was still going to be there.

"Now what did I say? We're going to have a shitty dinner and watch some shitty movie and just take it easy right now. You don't have to get drunk to not think right now, Hargrove." Steve brought Billy's hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles once.

Billy looked up as Steve sat down and tried to focus on him instead of his thoughts. He blinked several times just to *run off* his other thoughts, to calibrate his head before trying to respond to Steve. He did want to eat. He wanted to watch a shitty movie. Although, he doubted anything Steve made would be shitty. Even if it was, he wouldn't say anything. The idea that Steve was willing to cook for him? For Max? That blew him away.

"Yeah, yeah," Billy nodded, but his voice sounded distracted, even to him. He shifted in his seat and hesitated as Steve kissed his knuckles. "You need help getting the salad together or something?" A distraction for him. If only for a little bit.

“Uh, yeah, that would be good.” Steve didn’t mention how he sliced his hand open the last time he cut a vegetable too closely to his fingers. Steve rose again and started getting bowls and silverware out, set the table. It had been a long time since he had done so much for himself, or with his parents. His mother cooked when she was home, but it was a subdued and forced affair, like none of them would be there if they could help it. Despite everything that happened, Steve felt good about having company, about doing stupid shit together, it felt like more like a family than his own.

Steve set the pasta and sauce on the table before he turned to Billy and placed his hand on the small of his back. It was just gonna be another night to get through, but they could do it. Steve turned, grabbed some salad dressing from the fridge, and yelled for Max.

Billy smiled at that. He was glad to have something to do, but he was also glad that Steve was giving him that chance. He stood and wandered over to the fridge. After finding the ingredients, he grabbed the cutting board and one of the block knives. He didn’t say anything as Steve walked around, and he was surprised by how... okay it felt. How it didn’t bother him that they were both quietly doing what they needed to do to get things ready for dinner.

After Billy chopped up the vegetables, he searched until he found a large bowl to drop them all in. Once he did that, he set the bowl on the table and smiled again at Steve. The little touches, like the one to the small of his back, made his chest warm.

“I’ll go get Max,” Billy pressed a kiss to Steve’s temple and then walked away. “Hey, brat!” He grinned as he rounded the corner to the living room. “You hungry?”

It was really domestic for both Billy and Steve, but both of them craved some sort of stability, something that looked like something each of them had wanted. Max looked up and arched an eyebrow, “What did he make? I asked for meatloaf and did said he didn’t know how to do that.”

When Billy hadn’t returned, she figured he would just be Steve. It was hard for her to explain everything, having had most of it explained to her herself. She didn’t really understand Billy and Steve,

but Billy was different and that was enough for her. She closed her book and padded up to Billy.

Billy laughed, amused by how audacious Max was. He shook his head and settled his hand on her shoulder. He squeezed gently and then veered her toward the kitchen. "He made spaghetti, and you're gonna like it." His tone was teasing, his lips quirked into a small grin as he encouraged her to move, to walk into the kitchen. "Don't be mean, Max. I've heard what you've said about some of the food you've eaten. You can be a right brat."

When Billy saw Steve again, something settled into his chest, and he wondered, vaguely, what it was. It felt... strange. It was good, but it was also terrifying to him. It left his stomach in knots and his head light. He tore his gaze away from Steve, but the feeling stayed, and he felt well and truly fucked. Well, he supposed that was his life now. He settled into a chair and smirked at Steve to cover up whatever was going on in his chest.

Max stuck out her tongue at Billy, but she'd be polite. Steve seemed like he was really trying, even if it seemed like he was terrible at cooking. Max allowed Billy to push her into the kitchen, even when Billy stuttered again when he saw Steve. She rolled her eyes and sat down across from Billy while Steve served them both.

Steve knew it wasn't the best, but it should be at least edible, and if Billy wanted to give him shit for it, he was for sure gonna make him pay. His brow furrowed and he made sure to give Billy a large helping with a small smirk. He wanted Billy to feel safe, feel okay when really the bottom was falling out of you. It was going to be okay, Steve had to believe that, and he had to believe that Billy would be able to see all of this through. Losing him now...it would be strange, being in this house alone all over again.

Steve sat down with a sigh when Max quipped with a smirk, "Aren't you going to give thanks, Billy?"

Billy looked up in surprise at Max's question. He raised an eyebrow and then snorted. "Thanks to who? 'Cause the only one that needs thanking is Steve." He reached up, though, and slid his fingers over the pendant on his chest. He looked over at Steve and gave him a

little smile. "So, I guess? Thanks? And Max, don't be rude. You should thank him, too. Unless you've got something else in mind?"

Little shit. He'd get her later for that.

"Thanks, Steve," She teased a little and began to dig into her meal. Steve rolled his eyes and began to eat slowly, ignored the siblings banter with each other. It wasn't as bad as he thought, he tried to really season the sauce. His mother wasn't a terrible cook, but he had no interest in learning until this moment. He had just wanted them to have a nice evening and hopefully not give the Hargroves food poisoning.

Steve glanced over at Billy once, watched him touch the necklace his mother gave him. They had gone back to the house for that, it meant a great deal to Billy. Was it the only thing he had of his mother's? It made Steve's heart speed up a little to think of Billy as a little sentimental. Just another puzzle piece that people didn't look for, but Steve managed to find. Billy seemed to take a great amount of care with those things close to his heart. If they kept this up, would he do the same for Steve?

Billy ate more than he regularly did. He hadn't eaten all day, and Steve was not, in fact, an awful cook. He felt no remorse for eating as much as he did, for enjoying the spaghetti, for the little grins he shot Steve and the huffs he gave whenever Max decided to comment on something. He leaned back against his seat when he was done, gazing off into space as he thought about the day. Neil. Demodogs? El? The gate?

Honestly, Billy felt like leaving everything be for now. He wanted to drag himself to bed and pass out. Better yet, maybe he'd have Steve under him. Unravel him and make him squirm. Then again, if Steve was anything close to the mother hen he had seen with the kids, he'd probably force him to lay down and sleep. He smirked at that and glanced over to Steve.

"That was good, Steve," Billy murmured.

Steve's eyes widened a moment at Billy's compliment and he felt himself flush. He held back asking if Billy really liked it because he

was sure Billy would tease the shit out of him for being insecure. So instead he just mumbled, "Yeah, of course." But that did nothing to stop the stupid smile from forming on his face as he finished, as did both Billy and Max.

This was something he always craved, something real and loving. Who would have ever thought he might have found it with Billy Hargrove? Billy was going to be in this shit now, but with him seeing it--that could go away with time. Billy was strong, really fucking strong, and he wasn't going to be bothered by the same nightmares as Steve. The guy had his own demons to worry about.

"If you got homework, you better finish Max it, you can't get behind." Max gave Steve a little disbelieving look. Steve knew he was coming on a little strong, but Billy wasn't the only one that needed something normal. Max made a little noise and replied, "I only have a little anyway...." She pushed out the chair and headed back into the living room. Steve was sure she was just going to watch t.v. again.

Billy grinned at Steve's blush. It only convinced him that he needed to do this more, to find words that would make Steve look like *that* . Which meant, of course, figuring out how to be nice. He closed his eyes as he thought about it and then opened them again. At the comment about homework, he chuckled. Yet, Max's response made something inside of Billy melt. It was strange having such a calm meal. It was normally wrought with stress and trepidation over what he could do wrong to gain Neil's wrath.

This... this was nice. He glanced up again, at Steve, when Max made her way into the living room. A slow, devious smirk curled on his lips.

"I ate the meal, babe," Billy murmured, referencing Steve's earlier threat. Or was it a promise? He wasn't sure, but he had enjoyed it.

But Steve picked up on it, gave him a little bit of a sharp look as he rose from his seat, "You're terrible, you know that?" Steve leaned down and slowly kissed Billy once Max was out of the room. The blonde seemed really relaxed and Steve felt incredibly grateful.

Steve slid his fingers over Billy's shoulder and pulled back with a soft smile, his face still close to Billy's. "Does that mean you're supposed to get something, Hargrove? Do I *owe* you something?" Steve bit his lower lip to stop smiling, Billy made his blood boil but it was surprisingly easy to do the same back. It was just another aspect of the game, of the fighting, but clearly this was preferable to beating the shit out of each other.

Steve also knew he could take things only so far, not let Billy push himself past the point of no return, all so he could get off. But a little teasing...that just kept Billy up and running. Steve reached out and his thumb gently stroked Billy's jaw, feeling the stubble there. "Do you want something?"

"From my understanding of earlier..." Billy's smirk fell into a smile, something warm and ridiculous that made him feel so off, and yet so okay. He tilted his head, his eyes moving along Steve--from his face to his shoulders, his chest, his stomach. Before he got any lower, Billy glanced up again and his pupils were blown wide, an obvious answer to Steve's question.

It didn't help that when Steve touched him, it reminded Billy how sensitive he was to Steve's hands. More importantly, though, the way Steve touched him made him feel *wanted* .

"I want you, Steve," Billy murmured finally.

Steve's smirk fell from his face and he felt stunned for a moment, from that suckerpunch Billy laid into him. It was incredibly hard to tease Billy when he could just say things like *that* . Steve's heart began to speed up in excitement, of course he wanted Billy, he was sure Billy knew that. Steve felt his entire face flush and he knew that Billy had won this round.

"Well, you have me, Hargrove, I promise that." Steve said quietly as his hand moved gently into Billy's hair. It felt so strange to Steve, to have such a strong connection like this. He loved Nancy, really loved her, but Billy *did* things to him, and it was intense and with this longing that knocked Steve off his feet.

"I just...you're hurt and all..." It was insane to think he would sleep

with Billy, knowing him for sure a short period of time, and yet both of them knew more about each other than virtually anybody else did.

Billy watched the way Steve's expression changed and thought that, maybe, just maybe, he wasn't alone on this. Maybe Steve felt just as much as he did, even if Billy had a hard time expressing it. He let his eyes close as Steve's fingers moved through his hair and his breath stuttered. He knew why Steve liked that now. He had never let anyone do it before, but Steve... he was special.

"Promises are hard to keep," Billy murmured and opened his eyes to look at Steve. "Wait--shit--that came out wrong. Fuck." He grunted and shifted. "I meant. Damn it. You have me, too. Is what I meant."

Then, Billy hesitated. "I--you know I'm up for anything, right? It doesn't have to be... the entire way?"

Steve watched Billy go through a range of emotions and he felt a smile blossom on his face. He did his best not to tease the guy, it all seemed to be rather new to him, but it was...really cute and sweet. Steve leaned over and kissed Billy slowly, smiling against his lips. "I think you already know I'm a shitty liar, Hargrove."

He cleared his throat a little and moved against to straddle Billy's lap, similar to how they were earlier that evening. "But I know what I said, sooo...what do you want? I already know you're up for *anything*, I'm not going to..." Steve flushed a little and looked up. Jesus, it felt embarrassing to say, he didn't want to call it fucking or making love, and just the idea of actually having sex with Billy twisted his stomach in knots.

"I will--we can--when you're really better. I'm not driving you to the hospital to explain that." Steve didn't want to push Billy into anything like that, and they still had so much to discuss. Part of him wondered if Billy would resent him a little for putting his sister in danger, even if he virtually had no say at that moment.

Steve's smile helped Billy feel less anxious. It melted away the temporary panic that had began to grow in his stomach. Part of him wished that he could go back to the way he was--before Neil beat on him. At least then, he would feel some semblance of normal. Right

now, he didn't. Too many things happened and too many emotions, *foreign* emotions, were having fun in his head.

Billy shifted in his chair as Steve settled into his lap. His hands settled on his thighs, his thumbs stroking along the denim. "That's some ego you've got there, Harrington. Thinking what you'd do to me would send me to the hospital." He cupped his palm over Steve's groin, putting pressure there just as Steve had done to him earlier on.

A few moments passed where Billy just watched him. He was obviously contemplating something, thinking, his thumbs now tapping on Steve's thighs.

"How is your fingering game, princess?" Billy finally asked. His stomach clenched at the idea and he squeezed Steve's thighs.

Steve hadn't really meant it in an narcissistic way, but in the short while they were together, when he imagined Billy in bed...he just didn't think it was going to be a leisurely activity. Not to mention when Billy had him going, all Steve wanted (and would give) was more.

Steve sharply inhaled when Billy touched him and he looked up momentarily in an effort not to get hard. Part of the game was not getting hard so easily with just a touch, another unspoken rule that gave some semblance of control to the other person.

Luckily, Steve didn't really lose when Billy moved his hands to this thighs. Though that didn't disquel some *thoughts* Steve had, but then Billy asked him that, his mouth opened for a moment and his brow furrowed in confusion.

Of course, Steve had done that with girls, and they liked it, but *his fingering game* ? That seemed like a necessary part of sex with a girl, which neither he nor Billy was. So instead Steve quirked an eyebrow and asked, "Why?" His tone implied why Billy would bother to do it, since it made no sense to him.

Billy's lips curled into a grin and his eyes glittered as he watched Steve. This-- *this* was going to be fun. He squeezed Steve's thighs and then patted his left hip. "You're cute," he mused before sliding his

hands around to cup Steve's ass. He pulled him forward and tipped his head back so he could press a kiss against Steve's jaw.

"I just wanna know if all the rumors about you are true," Billy's lips brushed Steve's ear. "King Steve and all, right? Really good with your hands? I want proof, Harrington." He leaned back into the chair and raised an eyebrow. "Of course, if you're not up for it, that's fine. I can take care of myself."

While Billy wasn't necessarily always a willing bottom (and he certainly wasn't taking Steve's dick up his ass--not right now), he knew he was a bit too injured to be all in with Steve. Losing control was also appealing to him. After everything going on, especially with how shitty the day was, Billy just wanted to let go. If Steve could do that, fuck, he'd have a good night.

Steve groaned quietly as Billy palmed and squeezed his ass, relished the sensations as he felt Billy's kisses along his face. He didn't really like how condescending the remark came across, but Steve supposed it came from a place that Steve didn't know what he was doing--which was true. When Billy had his tongue *there*, Steve hadn't even known that people really did that, or wanted to do that. But it felt amazing, so he was willing to trust Billy on this.

"Where did you hear all these rumors about me?" Steve asked, amused, he turned his head in pleasure towards Billy's as their heads gently bumped together. Steve kinda wondered then if Billy had checked him out, it made sense, given their heated encounters. Billy seemed like the kind of guy to do a little bit of research and his aggressiveness in asking about King Steve only furthered to secure that belief in Steve's mind.

"No, no, I can do that, I can." Steve turned his head and kissed Billy slowly, arched with the kiss on his lap. If that's what Billy wanted, that was fine. It wasn't so much that he spent all his time doing that, rather that Steve enjoyed watching, enjoyed giving somebody pleasure, and that was just one of those things that did that. He just didn't understand why Billy wanted it, but Steve trusted him.

"I had to know my competition," Billy replied smoothly, his fingers dipping below the hem of Steve's jeans. He didn't go any further,

though, even if his heart was pumping more or he felt a little dizzy. "So I asked around. Of course," Billy shrugged then and pressed another kiss to the side of Steve's mouth. "I was just into you, too. Could be that." After all, Billy knew how to appreciate someone for their looks--and Steve happened to be one hell of a looker (at least, to him).

"Do you want to clean up first?" Billy knew Steve well enough, at least. He knew he preferred things clean, and Billy made a wild guess and assumed it was his parents. Teenagers weren't generally clean. "You know, we don't have to? I'm not--I don't want to have you do something you're not used to." Billy was used to it. He was *very* used to it.

Steve wanted to ask just long Billy thought about him, thought about this. Prior to their night of drinking a few days ago, and *jesus* it was only a few days ago, Steve hadn't thought about Billy that way. Mostly because the guy seemed like all he wanted to do was kick Steve's ass, and then he had, so that squashed any notion of friendship. Until he saw the bruises. Until Billy loosened up enough to open up. Until Billy talked him down from a nightmare. Then that electricity made sense to Steve, and when he sensed it and its strength, Steve knew what he wanted.

Steve smiled widely when Billy immediately directed the conversation towards Steve, what he wanted to do. Maybe Billy was a little nervous. Billy was way more experienced in the physical aspect, but not in the emotional component of whatever they were doing. Steve leaned forward, their noses touching as he whispered, "I *want* to make you feel good and...I want *you* to be used to that."

Steve kissed him again, slid his tongue in Billy's mouth and kissed Billy at a leisurely pace. One of Steve's hands was pressed to Billy's chest as he leaned into him, arched his hips slightly when they both heard a loud, "Oh, Jesus-gross, right now?!" Steve quickly turned his head, eyes wide as he fell off Billy's lap and onto the kitchen floor.

Billy's body warmed at Steve's smile and he couldn't help but squeeze his ass again. As soon as Steve's lips were on his and he was *seriously* sucking on his tongue, he heard Max's comment. When Steve toppled back, he let out a burst of laughter and dropped his head back. He

wasn't as shy about this shit as Steve was, apparently, because he just tipped his head back up and grinned wolfishly at Max.

"I can't help it," Billy rolled his eyes and stood from the chair. "This guy knows how to kiss, Max. You'll figure it out one day. Maybe. Maybe never." He mock-frowned and then reached down. He took Steve by his forearm and pulled him up. At the same time, he pressed a kiss right below his ear. "Later, yeah?" He murmured and slid away to gather the dishes off the table.

Steve flushed bright red, his mouth opened to say something, maybe apologize, before he snapped his jaw shut with an audible click. He had always been really open with Nancy, wanted to constantly kiss and touch her, but Billy and Steve had to be more careful, and being caught by Billy's sister was just mortifying. It wasn't a peck on the cheek or some hand holding, and what they had been doing and *talking* about.... "Uh, yep--yep, yep."

Steve hurried out of the room, past Max, as he heard her yell, "Isn't it bad enough that I have to hear it too? Maybe it's good I won't have to listen to it anymore!" Oh god. If the Upside Down was still open, Steve might willingly let it swallow him up right there. Steve took the stairs two at a time, just to be away from the siblings for a moment and in the privacy of his room. He took a deep breath and collected himself before he started to tidy up. Just some busy work. His knee hurt a little from when he fell, and it was a throbbing reminder of being caught in Billy Hargrove's lap.

15. Chapter 15

Summary for the Chapter:

Happy smutty New Year!

Billy watched Steve stumble off and shook his head. His eyes flickered to Max for a moment as he tossed some of the leftovers away and began to stack the dishes in the sink. He was quiet for a minute, seeming to think. That reaction from Steve reminded him that what they had wasn't *normal*. It wasn't... okay, he guessed? He pursed his lips and grabbed the last bit of the dishes. He tossed them next to the others and then walked over to the fridge.

It was hard not to concentrate on how this wasn't okay. California was a little more relaxed, sure, but Hawkins? He leaned down and grabbed two beers. After he shut the door, he turned to Max and smiled a little. "Sorry, kid. Seriously. I'm not used to--" he waved his hand toward where Steve had run off and chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Do you need anything before I go upstairs?"

Max gave him a little disbelieving look before she sighed heavily. Her homework was done and it was getting late, so she could just relax, maybe talk to Lucas before she fell asleep. "No I guess not, so you guys can be *loud* again." She hadn't really heard that much, being a sound sleeper, but when she woke up, she surmised what happened and buried her face under a pillow. She had learned about sex in school, and dealt with her mother in a horrifically embarrassing conversation about boys, but no, it was just more that it was *Billy* than anything.

"What you said before...you promise you're still going to pick me up and take me to school? We're still gonna...hang out? And things will be like this, even if I'm not here?" She frowned as she looked at Billy, resisted the urge to hug him. Their age difference wasn't a big one, but it seemed monumental at her age, and Max knew she was just a little sister.

Billy hesitated on his way upstairs and leaned to the side. He watched Max quietly for a moment and then smiled, a genuine

fucking smile, and reached out to pat her head with his free hand. "Yeah. I'll do all of that, Max. I keep my word." He paused and then took one of the beers, pressing it to her neck. "Cold enough?" He laughed, then, and moved backward because he was *sure* she was going to attempt hitting him (and probably succeed).

Their relationship had been rocky. It had started out...okay in California, but once they moved here, Billy was a ball of rage and anxiety, and unfortunately, she had been the closest thing for his outlet (because he was *not* going to go against his father). Now, Steve had something else Billy needed to thank him for. He doubted that, if Steve hadn't been there, he would have even tried to mend or start a relationship with Max.

Billy just felt, or had felt, that he had been too broken for that.

Steve obviously disagreed with that, but it was hard to say what would have happened if Steve hadn't had a panic attack. Would they be friends? Drinking buddies? Hooking up in the back of his car? It may have been Hawkins, and maybe things would be hard for Steve, there was definitely a steep learning curve, but Steve wasn't straight. Trying to assess who might be gay here was difficult and dangerous, really it was just pure dumb luck. Steve said that he knew what he liked, and what he wanted, and that was all there was to it, but it was nerve wracking.

Steve pattered around upstairs, glanced at his homework and sort of half-assed the little bit he had. His senior year was relatively quiet and Steve either understood the assignment well, and didn't worry about it, or he missed it completely and would wing it. He didn't worry about school and it was a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy with his parents.

He straightened up around the rooms, picked up some of Max's things so she could easily grab them tomorrow. It actually made him a little depressed to do it, his house never really felt lived in. It was how his parents kept the house and since Steve never stayed in the whole thing, it was how the house remained. Cold. It was going to be a guest room tomorrow and despite Max seeing him, and humiliating the shit out of him, Steve wished she could stay.

When Billy finally abandoned Max to go upstairs, he gripped the beer in his hands. He followed the noises of Steve's rummaging and then leaned against the door. He watched Steve for a couple of moments, staying silent enough that he went unnoticed. Finally, he cleared his throat and smiled a bit.

"Wanna drink, Steve? If not, I'll just shot gun them both," Billy's smile melted into a smirk and he pushed off the door. He set one of the beers down and popped the other open. Then, he offered it to Steve.

Steve jumped, having been startled, and gave Billy a little bit of a dirty look. Steve arched an eyebrow, but took the other beer. "You trying to get me drunk again, Hargrove? Not sure if I should do that again." But Steve opened the beer nevertheless and took a long drunk. One beer wasn't exactly going to do it for him, but he might start to get a warm buzz if he drank it fast enough.

"So did uh, Max say anything?" Steve asked apprehensively. He fidgeted just a little as he decided to make his way to his own room, trusted that Billy would follow him.

Billy chuckled at Steve's comment about getting drunk and shook his head. "If one beer does you in, you've got a problem." He told him evenly and then grabbed the other beer that he had set down. He popped it open as he walked after Steve, taking in his posture as they went. His eyes popped up at the question about Max and he shrugged.

"She asked me if I would pick her up and hang out, then take her home. Why?" Billy was purposely avoiding Steve's *actual* question, a grin spreading across his lips.

Steve glared at him a little as he sat down heavily on his bed. "I *thought* I heard her say that she heard us." Again, with the us, and not himself. Steve knew that he could be vocal, but he was able to be relatively quiet with Nancy. It was just that with Billy he was, well, *loud* . It wasn't intentional, he just got wrapped up in the moment and didn't bother to really think about what he might have been doing. It was embarrassing that he couldn't stop himself.

Steve took another big gulp of his beer, it was his father's, but he never really cared if Steve drank, so long as it didn't become a problem for him later on.

"She did, but I think you're over exaggerating," Billy shrugged and finally walked forward. He stood next to Steve and the bed, and took a long drink of his beer. His gaze was out the window, on the pool, and then his thoughts started to tumble again. What did the pool have to do with the demodogs? What about the gate? How did that have to tie into Steve's backyard, and why would Steve even blame himself for Barb if those things got her?

Billy tore himself out of his thoughts and finally just scrubbed his face with his hands. It hurt, but he didn't care. Shit. "I really think that her hearing us is like. Not even on the radar with the shit that's happened."

Steve followed Billy's gaze for a moment and was silent. He watched Billy think, and Steve knew there was still so much that Billy didn't know, shit that he wasn't going to be able to fully comprehend without being there and seeing it. And at the mention of Max's other concerns, Steve felt a pang of guilt in his stomach and chewed at his lower lip. "You're right, you're right, I'm sorry."

If there were all safe now and El was back, in time maybe it was all going to seem like this insane dream. Sometimes Steve felt that way, that he was just going crazy and he was going to take up and--everything would be normal? Shit, what was normal, anymore...

Steve finished his beer quickly, slightly winced as he forced himself to finish and set it down on the nightstand. He didn't want to drink to cope with it, but some nights it had really helped.

Billy glanced over and watched Steve down the beer. It made him tense. Obviously, Steve had followed Billy's train of thought. He tapped his finger against the rim of his can, which was only about half empty. After a moment, he offered it to Steve. "Wanna finish mine? I've had two already."

Perhaps Billy and Steve could just sleep. It'd be easier, and maybe Billy would fall asleep without thinking too much. Then again, would

Steve have nightmares? That was a problem, but Billy hoped that his presence eased those. It was a little egotistical to think that way, but he knew what it was like to have nightmares. He also knew what it was like to wake up from one nightmare into another.

“Yeah, sure,” Steve took it and drank it quickly, he hadn’t forgotten what he said he would do for Billy. And while Steve was going to do it, he was a little nervous. It had to be different with a guy, right? Steve reached out and took Billy’s hand. He hadn’t really had a chance to do much for Billy yet, and Steve regretted that, because he really did want to make him feel good. Steve intertwined their fingers as he smiled.

Steve really did feel lucky to be with Billy, the guy was just something else and Steve legitimately enjoyed just being around him. His grin widened a little as he tugged Billy gently down on the bed.

Billy wasn’t sure why, but the idea that Steve would drink the rest of his beer made him grin. It was ridiculous, he had to admit, but it showed how close the two had gotten over the last few days. Days--fuck, only days. He paused as he was pulled down onto the bed and chuckled.

“What’s on your mind, Harrington? I can’t decide whether you want to talk or touch. Kinda fuckin with my head,” Billy reached over and squeezed Steve’s leg. “You also look exhausted, babe. Maybe we should just sleep?” Steve still had to go to school the next day. Billy had to drop Max off, and then he’d be alone again. Shit. He used to like being on his own.

Not so much anymore.

“Hey, I said I would and I meant it.” Steve pouted a little, more concerned that Billy was *trying* to get him to back out, more than anything. “You’ve done a lot, can’t I do something for you too?” Steve rolled up and gently pushed Billy down onto the bed, before he half-crawled over him. “I *want* to, really.”

Steve bent down and started to kiss over Billy’s face softly and slowly, murmuring against his skin, “So if *you* don’t want me to do it, then that’s your choice.” Steve reached his lips and hovered over

them. When Billy tried to lean up, Steve pulled back just a little with a grin. "What do you want, Hargrove?"

Billy grunted as he was pushed down onto the bed and paused. Shit. He was going to tell Steve to fuck off, that sleeping was a better option, but Steve being on top of him and having *any* type of control made his heart race. He watched him quietly, at first, surprised that he enjoyed this. He had tried before--letting someone else on top of him. It hadn't ended well. It was too intimate and *too much* and Billy couldn't.

But Steve was different. Billy wasn't... adverse to it. "I dunno, Harrington. If you want, I can--I can just touch you." He didn't want to push Steve out of his element, and now that he was thinking about Steve's fingers-- *inside of him* --he was hard. And that was embarrassing. He wasn't sure if Steve would catch onto that, though.

Steve sighed a little, could sense Billy's apprehension, and surprisingly that eased Steve's a bit. He kissed Billy slowly again, just like before they were interrupted, as his hand travelled to Billy's jeans and gently unzipped them. "Mmm, tell you what, how about...I give you a blowjob and then...we go from there, okay?"

Steve bit his lower lip and he arched his back a little and took Billy in his hand. Billy was already hard, harder than Steve expected given how nervous Billy seemed all of a sudden. He looked up at Billy intently and give him a little smile, "How does that sound?" Steve pressed his thumb over the head, stroking him slowly as he watched Billy's face, tilting his head a little to the side.

Billy opened his mouth, his breath hitching in his throat as Steve took control again. He reached up and slid his hands over Steve's shoulders, his biceps, simply *touching* . He almost protested when Steve stopped kissing him, chasing his lips at first and then hissing as those fingers grasped him. He rolled his hips up and tilted his head back, his throat bobbing as he swallowed.

"Y-yeah," Billy opened his eyes to look at Steve and grinned, although it was lopsided and somewhat goofy. He moved one hand to push a few strands of Steve's hair back, even though it seemed habitual more than anything else. He pushed his hips up again and

held his breath. He didn't like being noisy--not because of Max, but because that just wasn't something he was.

Steve kissed Billy slowly, smiling the entire time as he gently bit Billy's lower lip and pulled back with a little grin. Once again, Billy had a day that he needed to forget, and considering everything that happened today, compounded from the weekend, Steve found himself happy to oblige. Steve kissed along his jaw to Billy's neck, softly sucking the skin there.

Steve scooted a little closer to him, laid on his side facing Billy, who was still on his back. He felt Billy try to move and he gently held him down onto the bed, gave him a soft bite to his neck before Steve dragged his tongue along Billy's neck, sucking a little harder while he groaned against his skin. He felt himself getting hard, since he enjoyed just doing things to Billy, enjoyed feeling Billy's muscles and his breath hitch when Billy liked what Steve was doing. Steve pressed his pelvis into Billy's hip, he wanted the blonde to feel what Billy did to him in return.

Billy wondered, vaguely dazed while Steve kissed him, if this is what he did to the other teen. He wouldn't mind. In fact, if he made him feel this good, just with his hands? He'd take it. He shifted, but didn't move as Steve basically planted a hand on his chest to keep him there. Instead, he tilted his head to the side to give Steve more room to kiss and bite.

When Steve started to suck, though, Billy's hips jerked up harder and he hissed out between his teeth. One hand curled into the covers, the other slipping down to stroke along Steve's stomach. Oh, he could feel how hard Steve was. He could feel the heat against his hip and loved the way he pushed into him. He *loved* knowing that this excited him.

"What're you doin' to me, baby?" Billy chuckled.

Steve's head perked up for a moment and he grinned, "I thought we established that it was what *you* wanted tonight." Steve let his cock go for a moment and then was quickly rolled up and moved over Billy, straddled just one of his thighs with his left knee nestled between Billy's legs, right under his groin.

Steve knew that Billy was watching him as he smiled widely, but not at all in the friendly manner Billy was used to. No, Steve looked like he was *very* comfortable and it was Billy who should be a little worried by what Steve could do to him. Steve slowly slid both of his hands up under Billy's shirt, slowly pushing it up to pool under his neck. Being mindful of the bruises there, Steve gently slid his hands up and down Billy's torso, teased him slowly before he suddenly fell forward. Steve caught and held himself over Billy, his hands just above his shoulders, and he looked down at him and smiled again, a little more like Steve then. "This is what you want, right, *King Billy*?"

Billy pressed his lips together as Steve let his cock go, muffling his noise of complaint. His lips fell slack, though, as he watched Steve straddle him and look at *him* as if *he* were the prey. He squirmed for a moment and then stilled. He didn't want Steve to know how much this affected him--how impossibly hard he was just *watching* him. He rolled his lower lip between his teeth.

Then, Billy's shirt was being pushed up and Steve was leaning forward, hard, over his body. His breath hitched and his eyes widened, the shock evident in his expression. He clearly had underestimated Steve. *Fuck* . He slid his tongue over his lips and arched his back so that he could rub up against Steve.

"I want more," Billy murmured. He wasn't used to asking for things, and he certainly wasn't used to begging, but his body clearly knew what it wanted.

Steve quietly hummed as he took in the flush on Billy's cheeks, the way he licked his lips. Billy was nervous. And Steve found that he really, really liked it. That expression was begging for a release, not just an orgasm, and Steve was going to give Billy that.

Steve sat back on Billy's knee, looked down at Billy's body, and took him in. Steve gently touched along the hard planes of Billy's body, gingerly dragging his fingertips along Billy's abdominal muscles. Steve licked his lips and sat up a little higher, nudging his knee against Billy's groin. "Do you know what I think you need, King Billy? I think you need somebody to *worship* you." Steve's voice was low as he lifted his gaze to Billy's face, looked into his eyes, "Do you want me to do that?" Steve reached out and gently pressed his thumb

into one of Billy's nipples, watching him.

Billy's grip on the bed tightened when Steve backed off. He wanted to yank him back, to gain some control back, but he fucking *knew* that's not what he needed. He needed Steve to touch him, and by the way his eyes seem to be eating him alive, he was going to get that. His thighs parted more as Steve's fingers slid over his waist, his abdomen, his muscles clenching and curling as he rocked his hips up into Steve's knee.

"Yes--" and Billy was choking on a moan, his hips stuttering as Steve moved his thumb over his nipple. His legs were completely parted now, falling to the side, finally *relaxing*. Billy sucked in a slow breath through his teeth and opened his eyes (when had he closed them?) to look at Steve. "Yes, Steve--I--" He trailed off and fought the urge to squirm.

Steve bent forward, made sure not to directly lay on top of Billy as he took the nipple he had been touching in his mouth. He sucked hard, gently biting there as his hand found the other and he gently pulled there. Billy might be a guy, but Steve knew what was pleasurable regardless of sex. Steve pulled at Billy's nipple with his teeth as his hand travelled back down his stomach to resume stroking him again.

He groaned against the skin, planted open mouthed kisses to Billy's other nipple as he ground himself against Billy's thigh. Steve stroked him quickly for just a few moments, just as heatedly as he kissed along his chest, before he slowed his hand. He quietly moaned and leisurely dragged his tongue over Billy's nipple, slow and taking his time.

Being the one on the receiving end was *not* Billy's normal thing. He usually gave and then took. He wasn't used to the attention, and the sudden moan that tumbled out of his mouth was proof of that. Despite trying to keep his composure, Billy began to squirm, pressing his chest closer to Steve. It was as close to begging as he got, but it *was* begging. He shuddered, tangling a hand into Steve's hair, holding onto the strands as Steve took his cock in his hand again.

"Steve," Billy pushed his hips up, forcing his cock through Steve's hand. He tightened his grip in Steve's hair and shifted, obviously

becoming impatient. Billy was more along the fast and heavy types, so it was *torture* lying there with Steve on top of him (even if he was slightly delirious with pleasure).

Steve hissed in pain and pleasure as Billy pulled his hair, but in return he quickly bit at one of Billy's nipples, lightly grinding his teeth before he dragged his tongue over the skin there to soothe the bite. His breath quickened as he looked up at Billy, watched him start to unravel, and he could see why Billy found this so appealing. Is this how he looked when Billy touched him?

Steve kissed down his stomach, gently nipping at the skin there as he murmured, "Do you want my mouth on you, Billy? Does my King wanna be inside my mouth?" Steve gave a little playful grin as he looked up, the banter was certainly a lot easier when he wasn't on the receiving end as well. Steve kissed along one of Billy's hip bones. It was so different from what he was used to, but all of a sudden, it was hard to remember that he used to anything except Billy.

Billy's grip loosened immediately when Steve bit him because he *knew* what it was for. He choked down his groan and scowled for a moment. He was ready to say something snarky, to respond to the bite, when Steve began to kiss down along his sternum, his stomach, along his hip. Instead of staying where he was, Billy eased himself up onto his elbows so he could look down at Steve.

"Yes, I do," Billy would have hated how breathy his voice was, but it reflected just how much he wanted Steve, and he guessed that was okay. He was coming to understand and acknowledge that whatever *this* was, wasn't just a fling. Not now, and probably not for a long time. He had basically fallen down the rabbit hole, and he was happy to keep falling.

Steve kissed his hip again before he took him in his mouth with a soft groan, Billy's hand was still in his hair, but Steve found it really reassuring. He knew that Billy was watching him so Steve made sure to turn his gaze up as one of his hands slid up Billy's stomach to his chest. Steve intended to do what he said, worship Billy. And maybe Steve wasn't as good at this as Billy, wasn't familiar with everything he was supposed to do, but Steve was enthusiastically willing to try his best.

He felt Billy pulse in his mouth and he moaned around him, taking him a little deeper until he felt that familiar ache in his jaw and his eyes start to get wet. Steve wanted Billy to stay at his side and he was going to do that by finally giving Billy Hargrove the attention and adoration he deserved.

As soon as Steve's lips surrounded him, Billy's hips canted off the bed and his head tipped back. He gasped, the noise loud in the quiet room. His hand tightened in Steve's hair for just a moment and then loosened. His fingers grazed along Steve's scalp, as if he needed something to do (he did--fuck he did). It was incredibly strange for him to just lie there, letting Steve do as he pleased, without pushing or pulling or demanding.

"Steve..." Billy tilted his head back to look at Steve, to watch how his pink lips stretched over his cock. It made his breath stutter and he moaned, soft and enthused. His gaze flickered over to the nightstand, and he was tempted to reach over to see if Steve had lube. He licked his lips and glanced back to Steve. "Y'got lube, baby?"

Steve looked up at him then, his eyes widening just a little in recognition at what Billy finally wanted, and all Steve could think was *oh, OH* . Steve pulled up slowly and sucked Billy's cockhead hard for several moments as he pressed his hand against Billy's stomach. When Billy writhed under him, Steve pulled away with a soft pop and panted quietly. He could feel his hair sticking a little to the nape of his neck as Steve licked his lips and reached over to the nightstand.

Steve fumbled around in the second drawer, cursing softly in frustration when he didn't immediately find what he wanted, before he snatched the small bottle. "Y-yeah I do." Steve waved it with a small grin as he kissed at Billy's neck again. Steve's voice was playful as he whispered to Billy, "Can I touch you? Will you please let me touch you?" Steve gently sucked right below Billy's injured ear, dragged his tongue there for a moment to help Billy remember that somebody really wanted him, wanted Billy and nothing else.

Billy almost (he fucking did) lose his train of thought as Steve's lips pulled up and sucked on him-- *hard* . He rocked his hips up and managed to catch a higher-pitched sound in his throat, instead gasping as Steve let his cock go and sat up to find the lube. He panted

and let his mind swirl with what he was about to do, what he was about to let Steve do. But he wanted it. He liked the idea of letting Steve explore him.

Billy was shit with communication, but he wanted Steve to know that he was *okay* with being vulnerable with him. This is how he knew how to show it, even if it caused him to be nervous (ignoring, or trying to ignore, the heat that simmered in his blood at the idea of Steve's fingers in him). He opened his mouth to respond to Steve, to say anything, and lost it as Steve kissed and sucked on his neck. The fact that Steve would still touch him or see anything remotely attractive about him after being stitched up said something. At least, to Billy.

"I--shit, Steve. I want you to," Billy turned his head so he could catch Steve's lips with his own. He bit his lower lip gently and then slid his tongue along the bite. He could feel his own breath against Steve's lips and he could *tell* it sounded desperate.

Steve sucked his tongue hard with a heated groan as he reached up and cupped Billy's cheek, deepening the kiss as that heat curled low in his stomach. He pulled back sharply, tried not to drown in the sensations as his breath harshly fanned over Billy's face. Steve searched Billy's eyes, just to be sure, before he kissed him again, sweeter this time as Steve acknowledged what Billy offered to him.

Steve made quick work kissing down his body again as his hands reached to the waistband of Billy's jeans. It was ridiculously hard to tug them down and Steve let out a breathless laugh as he took Billy's cock back in his mouth, sucking lightly as he inched Billy's jeans down off his hips. The closer Steve got to pulling them down, the harder Steve sucked. He moaned around Billy when the denim slipped past the curve of the blonde's ass.

Billy grunted as Steve pulled back from the kiss, disappointed, but then they were kissing again and Billy was moaning. He drug his teeth along Steve's lower lip and then shivered as he pulled back, opening his eyes just to watch him move down his neck and stomach. It seemed ridiculous that his jeans would be so damned difficult, but at the same time, it was great to release some tension, to laugh, even if it was choked off into a groan.

Steve's mouth around his cock again made Billy sigh roughly. His hips moved, shifting a little against the pleasure. He was embarrassingly fidgety, but he wasn't used to being on the receiving end, so he supposed it was reasonable. Billy's thoughts began to jumble as Steve started to suck harder, as his hand slipped over his ass. He bit the inside of his cheek and dropped his knees to the sides. He knew, from being in Steve's position, that it'd make things easier for him.

Steve pulled up just for a moment as he panted harshly, suddenly feeling a little nervous himself, but unwilling to let that get in the way of giving this to Billy. Steve coated his fingers with lube, his hair stuck to the back of his neck and sticking up from where Billy had grabbed it. Steve licked his lips and glanced up at Billy, "You had better tell me if I do anything you don't want--or you want me to stop, Hargrove." His hands shook a little as he took Billy back in his mouth.

The whole thing felt a little strange to Steve, but Billy trusted him and that meant more to Steve than his own insecurities. Steve sucked hard around the head of Billy's cock as a finger gently prodded him, touching Billy's hole slowly before he slowly pushed one digit inside.

Billy almost whimpered as Steve pulled up. The fucking *tease*. He nodded, though, at the question and dropped his head back as Steve went back down on him, as his lips and tongue encased his cock. He slid his fingers through Steve's hair again, his other hand firmly planted in the comforter. He could feel the coolness of the lube, and as soon as Steve's finger slid over him, he sucked in a sharp breath. He had to tell himself to calm down, to relax, because this was *Steve* and he knew he wouldn't do anything to hurt him.

At first, Billy stayed perfectly still, despite his little pants. He breathed shallowly and then rocked his hips experimentally down onto Steve's finger. His thigh muscles twitched and his fingers tightened in Steve's hair.

"*Baby ...*" Billy huffed, "More."

Steve continued to suck as he glanced up at Billy, felt his stomach twist in pleasure at the lilt of Billy's voice and his pet name when

they were like this. He watched him intently for any signs of distress or *pleasure* . Steve just thought it had to be different for guys, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt Billy. Steve pulled out his finger before he firmly and slowly stroked Billy's hole with two. Steve made sure to keep his mouth on Billy and hummed around him softly, his eyes closing slightly in pleasure as he watched Billy's body react. It was different from being with a girl, but not so different that he couldn't understand the mechanics of it.

Steve worked two fingers inside Billy slowly, catching them on the rim a moment before he pressed them inside. If this is what Billy wanted, if this is how Billy would relax after all the bullshit, he was glad to do it. His free hand squeezed Billy's hip as Steve felt Billy pulse hard in his mouth.

Billy *did* whimper when Steve pulled his finger out of his body. He arched his back and rolled his hips. His legs shifted next to Steve, clearly impatient and *wanting* . As two slid in, the bite of pain, the burn, made him moan. It didn't bother him--far from it. It grounded him, made him stay here with Steve, know he was okay and alive. Of course, it helped that Steve's mouth was fucking *heaven* on his cock, sucking while his fingers explored his body.

"Steve--" Billy was apparently talkative when *below* Steve, when taking his fingers into his body. He tugged gently at Steve's hair, urging him up. He wanted to kiss him. He'd rather be kissing him while his fingers were inside of him. "C'mere, please..." Billy needed something to do with his mouth, his hands, and he wanted Steve's mouth on his fucking *yesterday* .

At Billy's urging, Steve looked up and gently pulled off his cock. He was panting harder and his lips coated in saliva, which he licked at nervously to calm his breathing. Steve's large eyes fixed on Billy and he inquired, "Yeah?" It was simple, but Steve's voice was a little hoarse, the word breathy because Steve was trying to gasp for air himself.

Steve's chest rose and fell as he slid up to Billy, searched his gaze a little as his brow furrowed. "It's okay, right?" Steve licked his lips again then, pressed his fingers a little bit deeper inside just to test Billy's facial expressions--that Billy was still actually enjoying this.

With Steve's mouth off of him, Billy could finally concentrate on Steve's fingers. He squirmed for just a moment, rocking his hips down in a small plea for Steve to keep pushing, to keep moving those digits. His eyes flickered up to him and his jaw fell slack as Steve's fingers pushed only a bit deeper. His heels dug into the bed as he reached up to take Steve's jaw in his hand.

"Is--good," Billy managed, tugging him down so he could slot his lips against Steve's. He immediately pushed his tongue passed those lips and breathed him in through his nose. He moved his other hand down to where Steve's was. He had to lean up to do it, curling his hips forward, but he pressed his fingers against Steve's, urging him in harder. It was hard for him to say it, but fuck, he really liked feeling Steve inside of him.

Steve loudly groaned into Billy's mouth and greedily sucked on his tongue. He pressed his hips up against Billy's side, ground his pelvis there for a moment, as he felt Billy grab his hand and press harder there. Steve gave a small nod and pressed his fingers in as deeply as they could go. Seeing Billy like this was intense and *beautiful* and it was obvious he was rapidly losing more control as he chased closer to his orgasm.

Steve bit and sucked on his lower lip as he harshly panted into Billy's mouth. "I want to watch you come, you can let go, Billy..." Steve kissed along his face, down to Billy's jawline as he sped up his fingers. Billy was much quieter than Steve, but being so close to him felt really loud as he watched Billy buck his hips up with his mouth open. Once again, his body speaking for him. Steve wanted to give this to Billy, wanted him to forget about his shitty day and the Upside-Down, and help Steve forget too. Steve leaned over him and curled his fingers up inside Billy, pressing deeply inside.

Billy opened his eyes to look up at Steve, his own swimming with pleasure and something entirely different--something he wouldn't talk about. He closed his eyes again, though, and dropped his head back as Steve spoke to him. It wrung a moan from him, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he fought between shoving his hips into Steve's fingers and his hand. He began to actually squirm, and he would have been embarrassed by the tiny noises he began to make if he had any sense at all.

As soon as Steve curled his fingers, Billy's hips bucked and he hissed out Steve's name. His hand dropped from Steve's hair to his shoulder, his nails scratching the skin as a sudden explosion of pleasure rocked his core. He moaned, *loudly* , and greedily pushed his hips down so that Steve's fingers pressed into *that* spot again. "Oh, fuckfuck, Steve--there, please--"

Billy was mumbling, almost incoherent, which was so out of his realm that later, he'd probably be embarrassed as hell. But right now, he seemed to be consumed by pleasure, on the edge of an orgasm.

Steve's eyes widened in surprise and for a second he wondered if he did something wrong since he had never seen Billy like this. But as Billy begged, his voice rough as he said Steve's name, Steve had no other choice but to oblige him. His fingers remained curled and he struggled to find that exact same spot as he moved his fingers rapidly inside Billy.

He bent over and placed open mouthed kisses to Billy's neck, *felt* Billy's rapid pulse under his tongue as he sucked hard. Steve watched Billy's chest quickly rise and fall as he looked up, dragging his nose along Billy's neck as he looked at his face, searched his eyes. Steve's eyes were wide and longing as he took Billy in, all of him. "Come for me, Billy, please I just want to watch you come-!"

Billy lost the ability to breathe when his body finally toppled over the edge, shooting pleasure through his limbs, curling into his nerves and then exploding outward. He arched his back, the twinge of pain from the movement almost non-existent as he came over his stomach, a loud ' *Ah!* ' falling from his lips. His thighs closed around Steve's arm, clutching to him as he rode the waves of his orgasm.

This. This is something Billy didn't do. He didn't let himself be vulnerable. He didn't let go completely. Not normally. With Steve, though, everything was white-washed and blissed out, his whole body trembling as he tried to gain some sort of composure (even if he really didn't want to). One hand still clutched Steve, holding onto him tightly while the other gripped the sheets.

Steve watched Billy, absolutely mesmerized, as Billy's entire body arched up and he came, his eyes closed as he contained all this

pleasure before it just exploded out of him. Steve gingerly removed his fingers as he placed soft kisses all along Billy's face and neck. Steve actually felt proud of Billy and the moment seemed bigger than it normally should, but Steve would have to piece that puzzle together on his own—Billy wouldn't be able to articulate it to him.

He kissed all over Billy's face, whispered by Billy's lips, "Thank you, babe, thank you..." His tone was a little reverent, because he was truly thanking Billy. Billy allowed him inside, opening up his heart and body and Steve was glad it was for him. Steve kissed Billy once, softly, as Billy's body went through the aftershocks of an orgasm. He saw Billy's come streaked across Billy's stomach and without thinking, he bent down and dragged his mouth and tongue across Billy's stomach. Steve wouldn't admit to himself that he enjoyed the taste, but there was something about having Billy *inside* him, *consuming* him, it was strangely appealing and not something Steve wanted to think about too deeply. Not yet.

Billy sucked in tiny breaths as Steve kissed along his face and neck. Everything was sensitive, almost painfully so, but he didn't bother to shy away or squirm. He let Steve explore, too drowsy to actually do anything. When Steve moved down, though, he blinked, eyes still hazy from pleasure. He slid up onto one elbow, curious, and then groaned as Steve's tongue moved over his stomach.

Holy. Fuck.

"Steve," Billy tried to sound less in-awe, less shocked as Steve took his cum into his mouth. His fingers twitched and he shifted. He didn't move away, though, almost frozen as he continued to watch Steve literally clean his mess up with his mouth. "Fucking hell." When his brain actually started to work, the gears beginning to move, Billy reached down and curled his fingers around Steve's cock. He squeezed him gently at first and then grinned. "How do you want it, princess?"

Steve let out a choked moan and stuttered for a moment, grabbed Billy's forearm. "Don't—I *said* this was for you, what *you* wanted." So long as Billy was able to cum and just relax before the inevitable onslaught of questions, Steve was fine to take care of himself. Steve licked his lips and gently pulled Billy's hand back to regain some of

his composure. He would have to take a really cold shower, that was for sure.

He felt a little dizzy but grinned at Billy, in this sort of, “I saw, I know” taunting way. Maybe some people would be malicious about it, certainly people Billy met, but it was just more banter between them than anything else. “I’m just happy you...well.” And Steve grinned even wider, laughing a little to himself.

Billy forced himself up a bit more so he could be level with Steve. He hadn’t cared that Steve pulled his hand away, but he had never been one to just...not finish the other person off. It just wasn’t something he did. It felt *wrong* on some level. He cocked his head to the side and huffed at Steve’s teasing.

“You’re apparently good with your fingers, Harrington,” Billy’s fingers itched to touch Steve, to return the favor, and his eyes flickered over Steve’s body as he considered him. “But that’s a shit move, you know. Why can’t I return the favor?” He seemed genuinely curious, his body and mind seeming, for the first time, absolutely relaxed. He wasn’t thinking about anything but Steve and what was currently happening between them.

Not Neil. Not the creature on the bus. Just Steve.

Steve frowned a little, “I just...after everything that’s happened, I wanna...focus on you, so.” Steve gave a small shrug, he knew that what he had done was special for Billy, like really fucking special somehow. And Steve was happy that Billy seemed better, less wound up. When Steve saw him when he first got to the house and Billy said that he had seen *it* ...Steve just wished he could take care of him. It changed everything, everything you know about your world and what you told yourself on a daily basis to hold onto your sanity.

And when you see something like the Upside Down, it was like your whole life was a lie. You were so fucking small and even though there were cruel and vicious people in the world, they didn’t look like *that*, couldn’t tear you apart like you were nothing *because* deep down, that’s exactly what you were—nothing.

Having at least somebody there, it made such a big difference, and

maybe at least for one person...it did matter. Steve's smile strained, and he could feel his eyes become a little wet as he pushed past his own emotions and he kissed Billy softly, slowly, while he whispered, "I just want you to be happy."

Billy watched Steve, and although he was shit with his own emotions, he was really fucking good at reading others. It was what kept him safe (somewhat) in the house, kept him from being killed. It sometimes kept the beatings less harsh. When Billy paid attention to them, things just ran more smoothly around him.

Like now, he was watching Steve think, and knew he had gone somewhere else. It made his stomach turn, even as Steve pressed their lips together. He returned the kiss, but then gently bit down on Steve's lower lip. "Where's your brain, Steve?" He reached up and brushed his knuckles over Steve's cheek. "You went away somewhere for a minute there. I get--the whole happy shit--I guess, but how about talking to me?"

"I just..." Steve struggled for a moment and shook his head, it was hard, *really hard*, to verbalize how he felt about the Upside Down. He hadn't been able to do it with Nancy. Even when she saw the lights strung up in his room, and the (one) bat under his bed, he could never tell her all his thoughts on it. And when she kept pressing with Barbara, he felt frustrated. It wasn't that he didn't understand her, it was that the threat looming over them at all times, the Upside Down, the government, all of that could get much, much worse so fucking fast that sometimes Steve would just sit and think about that. Think about each and every scenario and what he could do differently, what he couldn't change, and who he would lose.

Steve smiled and looked at Billy, "I'm sorry, I just uh..." Steve swallowed, still kept his smile on his face, as one tear ran down his cheek and he quickly swiped at it. He could always talk about shit, about bullshit, and it was just that, because everything else was bullshit when he thought about what could happen. "I don't know what to say." Steve let out a soft, humorless laugh and glanced away.

Billy felt a low swarm of panic in his gut as he watched Steve wrestle through a lot of fucking emotions. When the tear escaped his eye, Billy tensed. He wasn't good with this. In fact, he was really fucking

shitty at consoling people, at trying to make people feel okay. It was not just a part of his asshole persona. Billy was legitimately *bad* at it, and he knew that, so as Steve started to sort of crumble, Billy's mind raced with what the hell he was supposed to do.

"Steve--" Billy hesitated before reaching out. He wrapped an arm around Steve's waist and pulled, forcing him to fall forward so they were both lying against the bed. He pressed his face against Steve's hair and swallowed. He hated that he was bad at this shit. He actually had someone he cared about and he had no real skills on how to deal with this. "Don't... don't apologize, and I guess--if you don't have anything to say, you don't need to? I don't--I don't fucking know. When you're ready, I'm here? Shit. That sounds awful."

Billy huffed, irritated with himself as he squeezed Steve closer to his body.

Steve laughed again though, this time with a twinge of humor in his voice. "It's not your fault, really, and I ruined the mood..." Steve pressed his face against Billy's neck and softly kissed him once there along his pulse. He was able to speak again, Upside Down fading from his mind when he spoke about it in an abstract way, "I just...I can answer questions, I can do *that* , but talking about my thoughts and how I just—well, I guess you've seen it."

He was quiet for some time, just feeling Billy against his body, solid and reassuring. "Nancy hated it." It was the first time he had mentioned her name since he had been with Billy, and it was incredibly confusing and he missed her, he did, but not in the sense of kissing her or touching her. He didn't miss her like he should as a former boyfriend. Steve meant what he said, he was a better babysitter than boyfriend to her.

"We used to fight all the time about it. She would try to talk to me and I would just..." Steve trailed off, he knew Billy might not like hearing about his ex, even if neither one of them defined this yet. "She didn't know about the nightmares, not like that, or...the panic attacks." Steve heavily sighed, "Or all the bats. I just couldn't talk to her about it."

Billy went quiet as Steve spoke. He ran his fingers over his back, his

eyes intent on his face and his own thoughts attempting to wrap around what Steve was telling him. He didn't understand where the creature came from. He didn't understand everything because he knew jack shit. He only understood that there was a gate, a girl named El, and a damned monster inside of a box on a bus. Still, he tried to understand what Steve was saying.

"So... you can answer questions," Billy was trying to find a way to make this easy for Steve. He didn't like talking about his thoughts, which Billy guessed was reasonable. He didn't either. Shit, if someone asked him in depth details about his and Neil's relationship? He was a live wire and everything around him was drenched in water.

"Is--is that how you want to talk about it? I can ask questions and you can try to answer? I already know about the nightmares and shit." He raised a hand, as if the holes from the nails proved it. Well, they did--but still. "This is new territory for me, yeah? I mean. All new I don't--talk to people--so I get it. It makes sense."

Steve nodded against his neck, it was easier than he expected when he wasn't looking at Billy. "Yeah, I can answer questions. I just...you know I used to be a big asshole, right? I mean the whole King Steve shit, I just...I'm not going to be that guy, but he's *there*, when you ask me things." It's not as though Steve thought Billy would think less of him, both of them had their own public personas, but he felt a lot of shame from how he behaved then.

"I just...it'll be different. Seeing it and hearing it, and I can't promise you I won't freak out a little, but it's not you and—" Steve tilted his head up to look at Billy a moment, "I want to tell you. I want *you* to be the only person I talk to like this. Okay...?" Earlier Billy had opened up for Steve, shared his body, and Steve was going to do his best to open up for Billy. Because both of them knew this was going to be *something real* for the both of them.

Billy tangled one of his hands into Steve's hair. He ran his fingers through the strands, parting them and tangling them around his fingers before smoothing them out again. His eyes were on the ceiling and he was obviously thinking. Hell, he may not have even realized that he was doing that, but it didn't seem to matter. He paused when Steve stressed that it was only *him* that he wanted to talk to, and his

body burned with an emotion that he was familiar with, but didn't want to think about.

"Alright," Billy nodded his understanding and finally looked down at Steve. When he caught his eyes, he offered him a tiny grin. "Still makin' me think this is more, princess. Gotta be careful with that shit." But there was more, and Billy knew it. He may not admit it, not now, but whatever Steve and Billy had was more than just lust between two teenagers.

"So, questions," Billy began moving his fingers through Steve's hair again and returned his gaze to the ceiling. "First one: how many of those things do you think you've killed with the bat? 'Cause your shit on the court, Harrington. I've got my doubts about you swinging that thing." He was obviously trying to lighten the mood--trying to ease Steve's nerves a bit.

It seemed to have the desired effect when Steve pushed himself up a little by his elbows, glared down at Billy. "I will have *you* know that it works pretty well! Stuns them if you hit hard enough and can kill them with a shot to the head." Steve huffed a little and flopped back down. "It doesn't work as well as fire. It hates heat and water, but I can't exactly set the entire woods on fire."

"...They don't always look like that though, not that...size or shape." Steve muttered, curled back up on Billy as he cleared his throat. The first time he saw one...he was sure it was some insane man in a costume, nothing else made sense.

Billy grinned as Steve leaned up enough to glare at him. He made an effort to look innocent, raising an eyebrow at Steve's response before chuckling. "It's... a good image, you know." Billy tugged Steve's hair gently, teasing him. "Sort of terrifying, maybe, but you swinging a bat? Kinda hot." He slid his fingers against Steve's scalp and continued to listen.

"Okay. So there are different kinds," Billy chewed on the inside of his cheek, "How did you first come across all this shit? I mean, what happened? I'm gonna take a wild guess and say the Byers' house because that shit was fucked up." He remembered waking up, half delirious from the drugs, and stumbling around before finally leaving.

Steve smiled a little as Billy touched his hair, turned his head to brush his nose across the inside of Billy's wrist as he inhaled deeply. "Uh...it was last year actually, but it was at the Byers house. It was after Will disappeared, Jonathan's brother, I went over to...apologize for..." Steve sighed and winced a little, "Punching Jonathan and painting that Nancy was a slut on the movie marquee."

He was going to leave out that Jonathan punched him back, Billy didn't need *all* those unimportant details. "But I thought it was just gonna be Byers, but Nancy was there and they were getting ready to...well, kill it, and I was just there. I didn't make the first bat, the one in my car. That was him and Nance."

Billy hummed as he listened. His eyes continued to flicker from the ceiling to Steve. This was fucked up--this whole little shit town. It was no wonder the place made his skin crawl. He tugged Steve's hair gently up enough to plant a small kiss on his lips before breaking apart to tilt his head back again.

The idea of Steve painting that about Nancy made his lips quirk. It was funny, especially considering who Steve was now. He settled his free hand on his own chest and fiddled with his necklace. "Okay. So they made your favorite toy. Alright. So, how big do these things get, Steve? The one I saw wasn't that big, but you mentioned that's not the only shape they have?"

Steve smiled a little as he kissed Billy, curling up against him before he froze. That he didn't like to think about. His smile dropped then and he became a little quieter, "The first one I saw was that night. It was...like a man and taller than me. Could—" Steve cleared his throat, "It swung at you too, ya know? Like a person could."

He closed his eyes for several long moments, "The other ones *I* saw were the dogs, the kids call 'em demodogs after their game, or some shit, but they start off like...lizards and grow into that." And their face opens up and they eat cats, Steve wryly thought.

"That's... shit," Billy paused and frowned. Bigger than a guy? That wasn't something he wanted to hear. "The other thing, though. I mean. The gate? It has to deal with that, right? What's the deal with the gate, and I haven't seen any blood on your bats, so are they not

around anymore?” Billy was finding that asking questions was easy for him. Sure, he didn’t like to talk, but questions were different. He wasn’t talking about himself or anything important to him.

Billy was finding things about Steve, and the shit he had gone through. It was easy when he thought about it that way.

“They’re not...so we haven’t *seen* any since El closed the gate, uh El is Eleven,” Steve quickly supplied, not realizing that opened up questions too. “The gate is how they get in from the Upside Down and that’s what she closed off.” Steve paused for a moment, just now thinking that basically every term he had to describe this was something the kids coined and he felt like a dipshit talking to Billy about it.

“He’s there, behind the gate—the...Mind Flayer—that’s what the kids call him, I just...call it the same thing. It’s...a lot bigger than a man. I haven’t seen it.” Steve murmured. Sometimes it was hard looking at Will, it was harder for the other kids to think like adults, but Will—he would get that far away look all the time. The other kids worried, hell, Steve worried, because that kid had seen the worst of it with El. They knew exactly what Hawkins lab was, what those things were, on a deeper level than the kids, than Steve even.

“So, the gate is closed, but that thing is still there,” Billy glanced down at Steve again and his stomach clenched. “And it knows about... about the kids. About you.” And that was when Billy tasted a fear that he had never had before. Sure, he was scared of his dad. That was just a given, a fear he was used to. This was that same fear, that same feeling, when he found out his mom was gone. And not gone to the store or the fucking beach. She was *gone* .

The idea of losing Steve to anything in the *Upside Down* made his stomach turn and his heartbeat jump. “Steve... you said you almost died several times?” His voice was a lot softer than he’d like. He sounded almost choked by it. Billy had lost the only person who had been important to him a long time ago. Steve had literally fucking planted himself inside of him, and as he blossomed and helped Billy feel whole again, the fear of losing him was almost suffocating.

“I mean, I...maybe it doesn’t really *know* about me, not like El or

Will,” but it did have a hive mind, that’s what Dustin said. Could the man and the dogs have told the Mind Flayer about him? That was something he had really considered. He just hadn’t thought he would matter on the grand scheme of things, not like the others. Steve was a mild nuisance, if anything.

Steve blinked in surprise at Billy’s change in tone as he smiled, a warmth spreading inside him. “But I’m *okay* , Billy. It’s done now, I just...I’m just a little fucked up, that’s on me.” He wasn’t sure if he wanted to get into all the times he could have died, Billy was tensing up and Steve could see it, hear it, *feel* it inside him, so instead of answering him, Steve started to softly kiss along his face.

Billy pursed his lips and then started to say something. He became distracted by Steve’s lips for only a moment, but he reached up to slide his fingers over Steve’s face. He held him still for a moment and caught his gaze. He stared at him, taking him in, and continued to fight feeling suffocated by his fear. “You’re not okay, Steve. Fuck. You panicked about me being in the pool. About...”

After a long moment, Billy let out a shaky breath. “I can’t lose you, too, Steve. I can’t.” The *too* part referenced his mother, of course, but after allowing Steve (not really, he just put himself there) in his chest, in his life, he couldn’t... “I will fucking kill every monster before you’re taken from me, yeah?”

Steve’s eyes were wide as Billy looked him over, held him still. Steve allowed Billy to search him, to feel, even though being under that gaze made Steve *feel* things, chiefly bring that he would do anything of Billy asked for it.

He swallowed hard, his tongue thick as his gaze dropped down. His heart swelled at Billy’s words and for once, Steve found it difficult to speak. It was childish, he was an adult now really, but having somebody try to protect him, professing he would try that hard, just for Steve, that was too much.

Steve interlocked their fingers as he licked his lips. His eyes became wet and he laughed a little, tried to lighten the mood. “So I guess a blowjob and fingering isn’t really that much to ask of me now, huh?” Steve locked eyes with Billy again as he softly smiled.

Billy watched Steve closely, like he always seemed to fucking do in moments like this. He saw how Steve's eyes became glossy, how his skin flushed, but he didn't push it. He wasn't there to break Steve. He was there to... what? Support him? Shit. Billy sucked at this. He licked his lips and shifted on the bed so he could slide a leg over Steve's hip and tug him close.

"Any time I ask you to do that to me, it's significant," Billy muttered and tilted his head so he could slot his lips along Steve's. He swiped his tongue over his lower lip and then sighed. "Seriously, Harrington," he mumbled against his lips. "Don't be stupid. I may be terrible at this, but... I still care about you."

Steve quietly moaned into the kiss, kissed him back steadily before Billy spoke to him. He looked intently at Billy, it was the closest either of them came to articulating what was happening and the fact that Billy was doing it first wasn't lost on Steve. "Careful, Hargrove, you're going to have me think this is more than what it is," Steve said carefully, echoing Billy's words with no bite to it, as he searched his face.

Steve reached up and gingerly tucked back Billy's hair behind his ear. "Maybe that's enough questions for tonight, I know you must have more, but you need to rest."

Billy resisted the urge to snort. He struggled to keep his eyes on Steve, but fuck, he did, as he watched him quietly. He sighed as Steve moved a piece of his hair behind his ear and finally dropped his head back. That was a good tactic--pull away from what they were by mentioning rest. He supposed Steve was right. He needed to sleep, especially if he planned on healing at a reasonable rate.

Yet, Billy was still uncertain about what *this* was. He knew once that fear had settled in his body that Steve was much more than someone to talk to. To fuck. He reached up and rubbed his fingers over his eyes. He could feel the small thumping of a headache starting there.

"Yeah... yeah, I guess we should sleep." And he'd take Max to school in the morning and then be on his own again.

Billy wouldn't have to go to court tomorrow at least, but beyond rest,

what was he going to do to occupy his time? His life wasn't just going to be picking and dropping off Max, she had school too. "I can get your homework, maybe you can come back after a week or two." Steve clearly planned to make Billy rest and relax, and Steve knew it was maybe something Billy never did before—take time to actually recover from everything he experienced.

Steve could see Billy was uncertain, everything was really fucking uncertain. By the time Billy healed, Steve's parents would be home, and he still didn't know how they would react. Depended on just how magnanimous his father felt at the moment. He watched Billy rub his eyes before he arched against him a little, leaned up and whispered in his ear, "Maybe if you actually rest, we can have a repeat performance." Steve smiled and sucked a little on Billy's non injured ear.

Billy huffed. A week or two? Jesus. He groaned and tried to push Steve away when he started to suck on his ear. "Christ, Harrington. I *will* fuck you if you keep that up, injuries be damned." He laughed, then and wrapped his arm around Steve a bit tighter so that their bodies were entirely flushed against each other.

"I wouldn't complain about a repeat performance, though," Billy smirked at the idea. Steve's fingers had felt amazing. It had blissed Billy out enough that he hadn't thought for several moments afterward. "If that's the motivation for getting better, I *guess* I'll rest."

Steve grinned as he reached down and gently squeezed Billy's ass. "I have to make sure you know I'm going to give you a run for your money, California boy. You're such a goddamn flirt, I just know I have some competition to try to knock out the park." Steve kissed him deeply again, smiling against his lips.

If Steve had to do that to keep Billy down and rest, that wasn't a problem. He settled against him and held Billy close, it was just nice like this. Billy made him feel so safe and...cared for.

Billy actually *gasp*ed when Steve grabbed his ass. He laughed, then, short and surprised before grabbing Steve's arm and tugging it higher, so it rest over his waist. "I dunno, Steve. You may just be giving me a run for my money here..." He was grinning, obviously

impressed with the other boy before they were kissing again.

It seemed that Billy was completely relaxed with Steve now. Each time the guy kissed him, he parted his lips and simply *melted* into him. It was uncharacteristic for Billy, sure, but Steve was his foundation now. His only source of stability in this fucked up world right now.

When Billy broke the kiss, he was trying not to let his body take over. "Y'keep this up and I won't be able to sleep." He bit back his laughter and sank into the bed.

That was enough for Steve and he quickly nodded, his concern overriding his other instincts. "Okay, okay." He pressed himself against Billy for a moment before he sat up a little and started tugging off his clothes. When his shirt was around his head, he *knew* Billy was watching him and Steve quipped, "I just don't wanna sleep in my clothes, pervert."

He chucked his shirt in the corner and arched his hips, smoothly pulled down his pants and pushed them off his legs before he moved back with Billy, brought him close again. Unlike Billy, he was still in his underwear, not wanting (or trusting himself) to be fully naked with the blonde. "Once you're healed though...I will, Billy, if you want to." Steve said quietly, knowing Billy would pick up on his meaning. It was the first time he said it, not in the throes of pleasure.

Billy leered at Steve as he undressed, more to be an asshole than anything else, then cackled at Steve's remark. He rolled his eyes, "I do have *some* self control, Steve. *Some* ." He shifted so he could wrap his arm around Steve again, putting it exactly where it had been before Steve decided to move. "That might seem far-fetched, but I do."

Then, of course, Billy paused and looked over Steve's face. He hesitated and then pressed their foreheads together. "We'll do whatever you're good with, Steve. Just... let's sleep and think about it when I can actually do what you want, yeah?" He grinned and ran his fingers in circles over Steve's back.

"I mean it, Billy." Steve said, very seriously all of a sudden. "I know

what I want. I'm not gonna change my mind. I want to...with you." Steve closed his eyes a moment and pressed his body closer to Billy's, his voice barely above a whisper. "I know you think I'm gonna run away or back out because I'm not...queer or whatever, and maybe I'll figure that out later, but I'm not changing my mind about you."

Steve opened his eyes, speaking a little more confidently. "And I'm gonna wanna have sex. You're really fucking hot," Steve laughed a little, "And I like you and I like what we do and that's all there is to it. So stop being a dickhead thinking I'm gonna run away from this. I'm not. Okay?" The issue of his own sexuality was something he knew he would have to think about later, but it felt simple to him when he was beside Billy. And that was all Steve needed.

Billy pursed his lips and tried not to tense at the word 'queer.' Honestly, he wished his father didn't have such power over him, but he did, and he had to seriously fight off the urge to snap or scowl. This wasn't Neil. It was Steve and they were talking. That was *it*. He breathed in slowly, carefully, and nodded his head.

"I get it, Steve. I'm fucking hot shit, you're not running away, you want me to fuck you--I get it," Billy smirked, then, and tried to distract himself from Neil's words. They clanged around in his head, but after a few moments, he managed to shove them down.

Steve was quiet for several moments, he allowed Billy his own space for a moment without replying before he kissed Billy slowly, held him a little tighter as he tangled their legs together. "...I more than *like* you. I wouldn't do this if I didn't..." Steve grinned slowly then and bit his lower lip, "But yeah, you are fucking hot shit." Steve laughed quietly.

Their conversation from the other day weighed on him, Neil's words weighed on Steve too. Billy didn't have an out and Steve did. He just wanted Billy to know he didn't want out.

"If you more than like me, Steve, you're a queer," Billy suddenly untangled himself from Steve and sat up. He ran his fingers through his hair, being careful of his ear, and stared at the wall. "If you like *anyone* the same sex as you, you're queer. Do you not understand what queer means? Or is there some type of different fucking

definition for you somewhere?”

“Jesus,” Billy settled his head into his hands and tried to bite back his words again. He grit his teeth and wished he could smoke in Steve’s room. He was not going outside. Not at night again and not out by the pool. He wouldn’t do that to Steve, but obviously that fucking word bothered him.

Steve watched Billy intently, and he knew that he was wrestling with himself more than Steve. He could have a lot of reactions he supposed, normally he would just get pissed Billy was taking it the wrong way or pissed at himself for not communicating properly, and still be pissed at Billy, because that was easy. But instead he watched Billy and remained where he was on the bed.

“Okay, then I’m queer,” Steve said softly from his same spot. “You’re right. You’re a guy, I’m a guy, and I like you, so I’m queer.” Maybe it should have been a bigger deal for him, he knew that, but with Billy, everything was just...certain. Steve didn’t really have it all figured out and he knew it was more complicated, but Steve wasn’t ever one to deny his feelings, his emotions ruled really strongly for him. To go against them felt wrong, felt like a lie, and Steve wasn’t going to do that to himself. Steve had feelings for Billy. If that made him queer, then so be it. Steve laid there on the bed, looking at the blonde’s back. He wanted to touch Billy, bring him back close to him, but knew Billy had to come to him.

Billy ran his thumbs over his eyebrows. There was a twinge of pain there from the pressure, but it helped ground him as he tried to work through his thoughts. Steve had been with Nancy. That meant he liked girls. But he’d also sleep with Billy, and he was starting to hate himself because it shouldn’t have labels. It should just *be*. There shouldn’t be a fight over what it was or wasn’t. His dad had put all that shit in his head, and he was playing right fucking into it.

“You like both,” Billy muttered. “Been with both, I mean? So I guess I’m wrong. I just...” The idea that Steve had rejected being queer meant rejecting *Billy* in some fucked up way. Maybe it was the fear his dad had put in him. Fags didn’t end up happy. Fags ended up alone and fucking miserable while the people they ‘loved’ went off and settled down with a pretty girl and had a *family* because it was

the *right thing to do* .

Which, Billy guessed, was even worse. If Steve liked both, there was an even greater risk of him leaving him behind because Billy was... He wanted out of the bed, suddenly, to smoke, his lungs burning.

Steve sat up very slowly but didn't invade Billy's space. He sat beside him and glanced at his face before he gently placed a hand on his knee. It wasn't hard to guess what Billy was thinking. The guy had a constant fear of rejection, maybe buried deep, but it was there bubbling at the surface now. "I...my Dad is a big asshole. You haven't met him, and he's not like your fucking dad, not even close, but he fucks around on my Mom. Like...all the time. That's why they're not here, so she can try to keep tabs on him."

Steve was quiet again, it was common knowledge in Hawkins, but not something he just went around talking about all the time. His parents didn't talk about things like this, things that mattered. "Even when I was King Steve, I wasn't like that. I will NOT—" Steve cleared his throat for a moment and looked down. "I'm not just gonna...fuck around on you for some girl. I will not do that, Billy. I fucking..."

Steve removed his hand and then sighed. That was a whole other thing to talk about with Billy, his parents. He was just so used to them not being there or their own special version of hating him that he didn't think about it much anymore.

Billy glanced over to Steve. His heart was beating hard enough to make him lightheaded, to make him feel sick to his stomach. As Steve began to talk about his parents, Billy's shoulders tensed and he held his breath. Steve wasn't so open about himself. Granted, Billy never asked, but he just assumed his parents were on business trips or some shit. He watched Steve quietly and then shook his head.

"It's not--I know you wouldn't," Billy frowned and poked his own temple. "It's just up here, Steve. It's just a result of that fucking asshole. All in my head. I just need to--not think about it. I know you wouldn't." He repeated the last sentence, as if he was convincing himself. He picked at the blankets and closed his eyes.

"He's just fucked up my head, that's all. It's gonna take a while to

unfuck it all, yeah?”

“Yeah, okay. Come...back to bed?” Steve scooted back and laid down. He looked at Billy expectantly, but he accepted his answer at face value for now. Steve hadn’t been offended and he understood where Billy was coming from, he just...god, Steve never wanted to be anything like his fucking father. He never did that to any girl, they were either exclusive or not, and Steve was always clear.

There was just so much neither of them knew about each other, and it felt like every new piece of information would crumble what they were trying to build together. He knew his father would hate Billy, but he hated everything Steve liked, so what else was new? Steve sighed softly and looked up at the ceiling.

Billy nodded, too exhausted to argue. He laid back slowly and turned onto his side. He tucked an arm around Steve and gazed at him quietly. “I’m... sorry, Steve. I’m still trying to figure this shit out.” He pressed a small kiss to Steve’s cheek and let out a slow sigh. “And I know I say stupid shit and... I’ll work on it, okay? I will.”

Billy’s voice was quiet, and it wavered a little, but he was being honest and open. Even if that particular aspect made him feel like his skin was peeling off.

“I’m sure I will say some stupid shit too, so the same thing goes for me, it’s new for both of us....” Steve gently touched Billy’s cheek, stroked the skin there slowly. “You’re the only person I told that stuff to, about that place, about...I’m just glad it’s you.” Steve whispered, looking at Billy’s face. “I couldn’t talk to Nancy about it, but I’ll talk to you.”

Then Steve pushed himself against Billy and wrapped his arms around his waist. Steve buried his face in Billy’s neck and his voice was a little muffled, “Now go the fuck to sleep before I kick your ass or grind pills in your pudding.”

Billy was going to respond to Steve, he really was, and then the guy threatened to put pills in his pudding and he laughed. He didn’t care that it hurt. He breathed in between little bursts and then shook his head. “God. You’re fucking awful.” He shook his head and then did as

he was told, sinking into the bed and relaxing against Steve's body.

"Night, princess," Billy murmured, pressing a small kiss to Steve's forehead.

"Night, King," was Steve's automatic reply, muffled against Billy's skin, a smile on his lips. He drifted off on the bed, his body weightless except for the heaviness of his eyes, which allowed him to sleep. Steve didn't have any nightmares to awaken them both with that night.

16. Chapter 16

Summary for the Chapter:

This is going to be the chapter where shit starts to get really crazy. Buckle up kids, it's gonna be a bumpy ride. Special trigger warning for gun violence in this chapter. Tags updated as we go.

In the morning, Steve quickly rolled over to vaguely slap at his alarm, hit at it a few times until it turned the fuck off. He groaned softly at first before he increased the volume of his groan, his hands came up to scrub at his face and rake through his hair. Steve cursed softly, tried to convince himself to wake up and more importantly, get out of bed.

Interestingly enough, Billy wasn't in the bed. He had slipped out earlier. Because of his dad, he tended to wake up ridiculously early to get ready so he could dodge seeing the man. For a moment, it probably felt off, but the smell of food was there. Billy knew how to cook, and it seemed like... he wanted to show Steve he was thankful. He was shit at saying it, so instead, he stood in front of some eggs and bacon, wearing just his jeans.

Billy was also chewing on his nail, though, a spatula in the other hand. His hip dug into the counter. He needed to figure out something to do during the day. He figured--hell, why not the lab? It was apparently abandoned. He could go see what that shit was about. He was good at breaking and entering, after all, and found it to be an amusing time-waster.

Steve would kill him, but he couldn't be expected to sit around all day and do *nothing*. Billy huffed and stopped chewing on his nail long enough to grab some plates.

Steve grumbled as he sat in bed, sucked in a breath deeply and looked around for a moment. "What the fuck..." He muttered under his breath and got up with another groan. Steve grabbed a pair of pajama pants and hopped into them in the hallway, cursed loudly when his hip banged into a table there, when he glanced in the

bathroom. No Billy.

“What the fuck.” Steve sighed in irritation, it was way, way too early for this shit. He stood there for awhile before he smelled something cooking and he groggily went down the stairs.

He didn’t so much as enter the kitchen as he stumbled, ran a hand through his hair, and waved a little as Billy stood shirtless in his kitchen. Steve blinked, “What the fuck?”

Billy blinked and looked back at Steve. He chuckled, amused by how disheveled he looked. “Morning, pretty boy,” he mused, leaning further against the counter so he could take Steve in. “You look... ridiculous.” He shook his head and moved the bacon and eggs off the stove. His gaze flickered back to Steve, though, and a little smile stayed on his face as he turned the burners off.

“Sit down.” Billy gestured toward the table and walked over. He set the plates down and settled into his own chair. His pills were off to the side. He had yet to take them. He planned on it, just not until he decided exactly what he was going to do that day.

Steve shuffled to the table, frowning in confusion and wondering if maybe he was in the Upside-Down or dead. Each one seemed more likely than Billy Hargrove cooking shirtless in his kitchen. Steve plopped down in his chair and looked at Billy blearily. “What the fuck is going on, you cooked?”

His hair was in disarray and he was only halfway awake, but he smelled coffee. “You know how to cook?” If that was the case, all Steve could think was: why the fuck he had been busting his ass when he could have saddled Billy with this?

Billy snorted and bit off a piece of bacon. He leaned back into his chair as he studied Steve. The guy was definitely not a morning person. It explained a lot about him, really. Billy was a morning person. He always had been, so he had no idea why Steve was grumpy. Although, he had to admit, it was cute.

“Neil didn’t cook for me. I had to learn,” Billy had done a lot of thinking that morning. One thing he knew: he wasn’t going to

reference Neil as his father anymore. It was Neil and that was it. He needed to start working on shit so that he wasn't so fucked up. May as well start with that.

Steve took a big bite of the bacon as he mumbled half around it, "S'good." He looked at Billy as he talked about his father, tried to think of something that didn't sound like he was being an asshole, but all he could think to say was, "You're better than me at it, you can do all the cooking."

Steve ground his palm in one of his eyes and groaned a little. He closed his eyes, squeezed them tightly shut, before opened them and looked at Billy. "Did you make coffee too?"

"I'll do all the cooking. You just keep your body ready for me," Billy grinned wolfishly. He was teasing, and it was obvious by the glitter in his eyes. He stood up and leaned over to kiss Steve's temple. "Yeah. I made some. Lemme get you a cup." He turned and found a mug. Honestly, he was okay with this. This was calm, and disgustingly domestic, but it beat being paranoid all the time.

"I'll get Max up in a second," Billy poured the coffee. He brought it to Steve and paused. Before going upstairs, he grabbed the milk and sugar, set it next to Steve, and headed up to the second floor. Max needed to get up if she wanted to be on time.

Max was still fast asleep in the room, curled under the covers. She knew about them and just...accepted it. So unlike Neil, but even her own mother. Susan heard Neil call Billy that multiple times and never argued, never complained. And then of course she had actually stood up for Billy, even violently in order to protect him. He couldn't just let her go back to all that. Billy wasn't there and after what she did...it was disrespectful and Neil wouldn't stand for that.

She stirred a little and slowly opened her eyes, mumbled his name into her pillow.

Billy made his way into Max's room. It was the first time he had actually felt *relaxed* while getting Max up. He wasn't angry or frustrated or *afraid*. It was weird being this calm. He leaned over and gently shook her shoulder.

“Hey, Max, time to get up. You gotta go to school,” Billy chuckled at that. He saw how Steve handled the kids, and he was starting to think Steve was meant for that. He was good at taking care of other people. Billy, though? Not so much. He pushed some of the red strands out of her face and considered being a jackass. Instead, he patted her cheek. “Maxine, wake up.”

She whined but sat up obediently, used to firmer methods of waking her. “You’re gonna still take me to school, right?” Max rubbed her eyes as she slid out of the bed. “I need to take a shower, we have time for that?” Max peered up at him, even this morning routine was so different from what she was used to. She was used to Billy ripping off the covers and barking at her to get her ass up.

“I still want you to take me, not Steve today, you promised.” Max started, somewhat already waiting for an argument or Billy to back out of what he said. That was familiar between them.

“You have enough time,” Billy glanced down at Max and then huffed. “Yeah, yeah, brat. I remember. I’m still taking you. I said I would.” Which, before, hadn’t really meant shit. But again, Billy was trying to change. He was referencing his father as Neil and he was going to do his damned best to keep his promises to Max. He hesitated at the door on his way out and looked over at Max.

“Just hurry up, okay? You need to eat before you go, too, and Harrington will yell at *me* if you don’t,” Billy gave her a look and then headed back downstairs. When he got to the kitchen, he swiped his pills off the table and took them with his orange juice.

Steve was slumped back in his chair, holding the coffee mug tightly to his chest with his eyes closed. He heard Billy come downstairs and didn’t bother to open his eyes. The mug was so warm in his hand and that was all that mattered to him. He had already eaten his food and hummed a little. “Thanks for cooking.”

Steve opened his eyes slowly and let his head loll back to look at Billy. “It was really good.” His hair was still a huge mess, but he was satisfied for the moment and didn’t care. Steve didn’t even make himself cereal in the morning, he was usually running out the door, on the verge of being late.

“You’re welcome,” Billy muttered. Obviously, he wasn’t used to the praise. He wasn’t used to being acknowledged for things he did, and while he was still trying, he would deny that his face was a tad bit warmer. He cleared his throat and nodded toward the stairs.

“Max is up. She’s going to shower and eat. I’ll take her to school. You don’t have to worry about that.” He downed the rest of his orange juice and put the glass in the sink.

Steve quirked an eyebrow, “Are you gonna be okay to drive? I can do it and just be late.” He turned a little in the chair, secretly pleased though that Billy willingly did something for himself. Steve rested his head back and looked him up and down, Billy looked nice like this, really nice like this.

Steve bit his lower lip a little, stared at Billy, and he wished he didn’t find this as attractive as he did. And when did Billy even wake up? Steve hadn’t noticed he was gone until he woke up, and for once he felt...rested. It was strange after so long, but after a couple days of actually sleeping, Steve felt a little more like himself.

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. I told her I would.” Billy shrugged and reached over to his plate. He took another piece of bacon and popped half of it into his mouth. “Although, if she doesn’t hurry up, she will be late.” He raised an eyebrow and glanced toward the stairs.

“So, question...” Billy gnawed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, “I got Max her board in Cali. Where can I get one here?” He needed to replace it. Again, thinking a lot that morning lead to a lot of decisions, and he was okay with most of them.

Steve frowned in thought, he didn’t know of any in Hawkins, “Uh, probably a shop in Chicago. I can’t think of any here, but there’s a sport store like warehouse outside of town by the mall, maybe you can order one there.” Clearly it was for Max, Steve didn’t think Billy would get one for himself or Steve. He was unsure why Billy seemed so determined that morning, but it was a nice look and he wasn’t going to comment on it.

Steve stood up and meandered over to Billy before he draped his arms around Billy’s shoulders and smiled. “Thanks again, I never

fucking eat before school.”

“I may order one. Or take her on a roadtrip,” Billy hesitated. “Do..you think she’d do that? Shit.” Uncharted territory, there, and he was starting to get nervous about everything that he had thought about. Sure, it sounded good in his head. But on paper? Said out loud? He sounded fucking stupid. He closed his mouth and then paused as Steve wrapped his arms around his shoulders.

“Not good for you,” Billy murmured. Of course, his breakfast was usually two or three cigarettes in the car before dropping Max off. Not really any better. He reached up and pushed some of Steve’s hair out of his face. “I’ll have to start forcing you to eat, yeah?”

It warmed Steve to see Billy caring for Max. He was sure Max was a lot more open to their sibling relationship than Billy thought. She could have rejected Billy at any moment and she refused to, even in the face of losing the rest of her family. Sure, they both had their own shit to work through, but if both of them were willing to do it...

“I mean, I might actually eat it if you cook like that. Sometimes I cook and then don’t eat it.” Steve didn’t conclude because it was disgusting and inedible, Billy could draw his own conclusions. “Seems like you’re trying to take care of me? What?” Steve rested his forehead against Billy’s, “If the real Billy is inside, please wink so I can set you free.” Steve grinned widely, tugged Billy closer as started laughing at his own joke. “ *I’ll save you babe !*”

Billy parted his lips to respond to Steve, to be *serious* and then he was laughing. His laughter rang loud and he tried to stifle it, but snorted anyway, little chuckles erupting from him as he grabbed Steve’s sides and pushed him away. He held him at arm’s length and narrowed his eyes after finally managing to calm himself down.

“Fuckin’ stop, asshole,” Billy breathed, “I swear, if *this* is how I get treated for trying, I’m gonna stop that shit real quick.” He hesitated. “Or, I’ll just find out if you’re ticklish. And if you are, I will wreck you, Steve Harrington.”

Steve laughed with him for just a moment, and nearly quipped that he was just teasing and loved his cooking, because he *did* , and this

his brain short circuited for just a second too long. Billy wouldn't do that to him. He hummed and smiled, "I'm gonna get ready upstairs, hustle Max out of the shower." Steve turned to head up, pulled away from Billy quickly.

Billy raised an eyebrow and noted, in the back of his head, that he'd need to figure out if Steve was ticklish later. He watched him walk up the stairs and then stole his mug of coffee. After taking several sips and making a face, he cleaned up the dishes that were already done.

His mind wandered back to the lab. He wanted to see that, so he guessed that was first on his list out of everything that he needed to do. It probably wouldn't answer all his questions, but he'd have a better idea of what Steve was talking about (at least, he hoped).

If he went to the lab though, Billy wouldn't be able to tell Steve about anything he saw, or even that he went. Steve would be *furious* with him, because Billy put his life in danger. That was a big risk, and even if Steve would forgive him over time, Steve would likely make things unbearably for the near future.

Steve said the first one he saw was bigger than him, could they be just wandering around there? If he did that, he was going to need a weapon of some sort, going in blind would be suicide. Another question was what could Billy use? Steve said it hated fire and water, but what was Billy going to do? Construct a weapon under Steve's watchful gaze?

Max and Steve were shouting at each other upstairs about the shower, something about hot water, before she quickly bounded down the steps. Max grinned at Billy. "I'm ready to go! Shower was great!" There was another loud curse upstairs as Max grabbed some bacon and toast, shoving it in her mouth innocently.

Billy's thoughts derailed as Max flew down the stairs and grabbed a piece of toast and some bacon. He hid his smile behind Steve's coffee, which he was still stealing. He set it down and grabbed his shirt and jacket. After throwing those on, he stuffed his feet into his boots and leaned toward the stairs.

"Taking Max to school, asshole! See you later!" Billy laughed and

walked to the front door. He opened it and gestured for Max to head out first. At least the morning felt... a little more normal than it had in the last couple of days.

Part of him actually wanted to go to school. He hated sitting around, but he also didn't want to sit through a lecture with Steve. The guy had serious mother-hen issues. He snorted and followed Max to the Camaro. As he climbed in, he glanced over to her. He didn't say much, though, slid the key into the ignition and turned the engine over as he pressed in the clutch.

They drove in relative silence, as this wasn't really an activity either one of them willingly participated in before today. Max swallowed and looked over at Billy, "Do you—can I maybe spend the night? On the weekends? Can you ask for that?" It wasn't as if Max didn't liked El, it was just that she wasn't her sibling and ultimately, Max was just imposing. It was always different to impose on family versus a stranger.

"I can even make breakfast on the weekends, like pancakes. I know how to make those." They arrived at the school and the boys were already lingering around, waiting for her before the bell rang. Max had friends in California, sure, but the Party was so different, and the Party had Lucas.

Billy tapped his thumbs on his wheel as he drove. The silence was better than it used to be. There wasn't any tension, and he didn't feel like Max was going to pulverize his nuts. He looked over at the question and then snorted. "Kid, I don't care when you want to visit. You call, and I'll come get you." He had been a shitty brother, and this whole fucking ordeal made Max lose *everything*. Billy knew he was at fault for that, and he had to find a way to make up for it.

"Hey... this weekend, I was thinking about a road trip. Just me and you, yeah? We can invite Steve if you want, but he doesn't have to come." Billy glanced over and waited for Max's response. He either asked now or he'd pussy out and pretend he never thought about it.

Max blinked in surprise and looked at him carefully for a long time before she launched herself at Billy, hugging him tightly and nodding against his chest. Dustin was in the distance, pointing and shouting

something like almost looked like an insinuation that Max was going to die.

“Yeah, yeah, I wanna do that Billy.” It was very strange between both of them, but they only had each other in this. And Max was on the ledge if she went back home, just waiting for Neil to push her over.

She pulled away slowly and laughed a little. “Just don’t be an asshole or I’ll clock you.” Her eyes were suspiciously wet but she didn’t shed a tear as she smiled up at him.

“You have a good swing,” Billy muttered. He hadn’t pulled away from the hug. It had made him feel awkward, sure, but he didn’t move. Instead, he patted her head and waited for her to get out of his car. “This weekend. Just me and you. We’ll get the hell out for a while.” He offered her a small smile, a look that he only had for those who got close, who actually managed to pry away whatever walls he had built.

“I’ll pick you up here. Don’t be late. I swear, I’d rather have Neil smack me than Steve look at me with that *face*,” Billy laughed, then and put his car into first. “Later, Maxine. Out.”

She called him an asshole but jumped out of the car, slammed his door shut, before she ran off to her friends. Max and Steve weren’t just going to leave him, and that was a really strange feeling. It certainly wasn’t true a week ago and it was daunting to think about how much had changed. How much he knew.

Billy still had to make a plan about that. There were way too many unanswered questions, too many things left to unravel and it made things unsafe for everybody. Especially the people he cared about.

Once Billy knew Max was inside, he put the car in first and sped away. He chewed on the inside of his cheek as he began to drive. Questions kept rolling through his mind and he hated that he had no answers. It was like no matter what he did, things would keep falling away from him--too far to reach. Granted, he had only known about this shit for two days.

Before he realized what he was doing, Billy was pulling up into the

junkyard and staring at the bus again. He tapped at the steering wheel again and pulled the e-brake. Honestly, this shit was out of some horror movies. He yanked his key out of the ignition, got out, and trudged over to the bus again.

One last look at that thing wouldn't hurt, right? He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

Steve took it on with a bat and it was dead, it wasn't going to do anything now. The air was still at the junkyard and weighed heavily upon Billy, like the universe knew what he was doing was wrong. The smell hit him hard first, it lingered there. The smell of wet leaves and rotten meat. It was hard not to gag, it was an onslaught against the senses, and the closer you got, the stronger it was. The trunk was there where Billy had left it, but somehow the smell was even worse since he disturbed it. Did it smell this way alive?

Billy needed answers, real answers to all this. If he kept pressing Steve, not the way Billy needed to answer this shit, because it wasn't going to end well. There would be more nightmares, another bad panic attack, something. And it would be Billy's fault for forcing Steve to talk to him.

Its arm wasn't sticking out any longer, he must have accidentally shut it inside. He hadn't been thinking clearly when he saw it, it was all just this sickening rush of adrenaline and death at once. But maybe if Billy knew what it was, if he understood it, he could learn a way to fight it. Protect what he needed to protect.

Billy took in a shuddering breath as he got closer to the box. He hesitated, at first, hoping against all odds that maybe Steve was bullshitting him. Of course, that was a load. Steve's panic attacks? His nightmares? It all made sense, and Billy hated it. He reached down and pulled the box open. At this point, he was ready to see the corpse again, to come to terms with it, but there was a fucking problem.

The corpse was gone. He shut the box and stepped back, his eyes flickering around the junkyard rapidly. Shit. Why would it not be here? Where would it have gone? Could it have... there was no way it was revived, right? It was good and dead last time he saw it? Billy

stumbled back and then turned, made a beeline out of the bus.

Shit, shit, what if it was never dead? Was it smart enough to play dead? It seemed really fucking dead when Billy left it. He kicked the trunk, it didn't move—maybe somebody moved it. But he had been alone, he was sure of that. Nearly certain. *They're watching us.*

That's what Steve had fucking said to him. Who? Had to be the people from Hawkins lab, but they were gone. Somebody was fucking with Billy. Somebody had seen him. There was no way, no fucking way that thing was alive.

Right?

And now he *really* couldn't tell Steve about this. This would send him into a major panic attack for sure.

Billy stumbled to his car. He ran his fingers through his hair, cursing under his breath as he yanked his door open. What was he supposed to do? The corpse was gone. What did that even mean? He couldn't ask Steve. He would never do that. The idea of putting that on top of everything else on Steve's shoulders... it just wasn't going to happen. He'd fucking die first.

As Billy climbed into his Camaro, his thoughts went back to Steve again. He yanked it in reverse and kicked gravel up as he tore ass out of the junkyard. Steve had mentioned people. They. The doctors from the lab, maybe? He grit his teeth as he moved onto a regular road, his palm bounced against his steering wheel.

Fuck.

They were all supposed to be gone, Billy knew that before, since all that shit came out about the dead girl. Going there still might not be a smart idea. If more of those things were inside, Billy would be defenseless like this. He didn't even have a goddamn bat.

There was the dead girl and the Byers boy. Billy had met him the other night, Will. Very quiet, but when he talked, the other kids stopped being little bastards and listened to him. He only vaguely knew about him missing before hooking up with Steve, small town

rumors were always juicy gossip for newcomers. That meant Jonathan Byers was also involved, who he peripherally knew from school.

Billy felt completely twisted, jumbled. He wasn't sure what to do, and if he kept driving, he was sure he'd wrap his damn car around a tree. Finally, because he knew he was being far more dangerous than he wanted, he pulled off onto the side of the road and slumped back against the seat. He breathed in shallowly, the panic in his stomach made his ears ring and his vision dim around the edges.

The fact that the thing wasn't there was bad. He knew that. Deep in his gut, that fucking meant something. He couldn't tell Steve. Couldn't tell Max. He had to keep it to himself, but how was he supposed to do that when he knew absolutely fucking *nothing* other than the tidbits of information he got from Steve?

"Fuck me," Billy groaned and gripped his steering wheel tightly. He needed to calm down before he drove again.

When his heart finally stopped pounding so hard it made him sick, there were a couple options. He could talk to several of the people Steve mentioned were part of all this, but it also couldn't get back to Steve himself. Doing this on his own was one thing, but if it got back to Steve, he would have to either tell the truth or lie to Steve's face. Neither was really a good option.

If the thing was alive, he should find it and kill it, but that likelihood was slim, nothing that smelled that bad was alive anymore. Which meant somebody saw him and took it. There were only so many people that would follow Billy, here of all places, and then take that thing. Who could take something like that and not have their own little breakdown as a result? Not a random fucking person. It was deliberate and Billy played right into it.

Steve was never going to forgive him.

Instead of going to Steve's house, Billy pulled his car onto the road and headed toward the quarry. It was quiet there, and if anyone was fucking following him, or giving him issues, he would know. There was only one road there, and Billy knew that if he did it, he could

trap himself, but he wasn't going to lead them to Steve or the kids. Fuck that.

The drive to the quarry was eerily quiet for him. He didn't play music loud like he normally did, listening for anything out of the ordinary. When he finally pulled onto the gravel road that lead down to the water, he held his breath. Parking the car was difficult. He wanted to turn himself around and fucking get out of there, but he had to make sure. He had to know. He pulled the e-brake on the car and then yanked a cigarette from his pack. Slowly, he eased his door open and got out of the car.

It was no wonder really that Steve had panic attacks all the goddamn time, it was enough to drive a person insane. Maybe Steve could have talked to Nancy or Byers, but he explicitly told Billy he didn't, and obviously Steve wouldn't burden the kids either. Billy knew it wasn't something little kids should have to deal with, and hell, Billy and Steve were still teenagers. Steve clearly just thought about this all the time, for what, a year?

There was a light breeze above the quarry and the air here was cleaner, even the water down below didn't smell so bad in comparison. It was almost peaceful, until there was the soft sound of an engine coming down the small road. A large white van rolled down, slow and purposeful. Somebody who worked at the quarry would get to where they needed to be, but the van was slowing down to look, to look for something or *somebody*.

The van rolled to a stop about 20 feet away from Billy, and the engine was still turned on when five people stepped out. Three of them lingered there, watched Billy, *clearly* watched Billy, as the two others approached him slowly. The gravel crunched under their feet, they were both in rather casual clothes, just like anybody he would see on the street.

Billy's lips twitched. Fuck. He knew it. He licked his lips and then lit his cigarette. He had to play this cool. He had to act like he didn't give a shit, even if his heart was beating so hard that he had trouble catching his breath. He took the cigarette between two fingers and breathed in deeply, let the smoke fill his lungs before he exhaled it through his nose. He turned slowly, facing the men, and eased the

cigarette out of his mouth.

“You fellas want something?” Billy asked. He made sure to keep his voice low, quiet, so that if they were doing any shit like recording it would be barely audible. He kicked his head up and looked at them with his attempt of a bored expression on his face.

“Kinda fuckin’ creepy following a kid around, don’t you think?” Into a secluded place like this, especially. His thoughts ran back to Steve, to ‘They’ and he knew what he meant now.

“Actually, it seems like this meeting is overdue, Mr. Hargrove. Nobody intends you any harm, of course, but it’s difficult to assess your...allegiances, and after you went back to the bus, we thought this might be best.” Thing One stood there, his shoulders back, taut and ready to grab Billy if he needed to. Truthfully he *seemed* a lot like Neil, a man who was just waiting for the right opportunity, the right moment to grab and beat Billy’s face in.

Thing Two was the talker, maybe higher up in all this. Neither looked like they obviously were with the government or military, but that was the point. Thing Two lit up his own cigarette with a smile, like they were sharing a lovely moment together. “We ought to thank you, really, rounding up those little bodies has been quite a chore. It’s always a guessing game where one is going to turn up. A farm, a home, a junkyard. So many choices.”

Billy’s lips curled as he tightened his fingers on his cigarette. He stared at the first guy and then took another drag of his cigarette. His eyes flickered to the second and he puffed out his smoke directly toward his face with a smirk.

“I don’t have an allegiance with anyone, dickbags. And, for your fuckin’ information, Mr. Hargrove is my dad. So, stick that where it belongs.” Billy glanced toward the road and then the van. Five of them? Seriously? For just Billy? He drug his lower lip along his teeth and then chuckled. “You all got a serious problem if you’re having to stalk kids to keep your dirty ass sheets from airing in the wind, yeah?”

How long had they been following him? Anxiety rocketed through

him and he shifted his feet, as if he were going to make a move. He didn't, of course--he was simply gauging what the idiots would do if he moved.

"I'm not necessarily sure that's true, Mr. Hargrove," He replied, purposely ignoring Billy. "You've been staying with Mr. Harrington since Friday evening, correct? Now, I don't usually overstay my welcome when I'm a guest in somebody's home, but maybe you aren't just a guest." Thing Two took a deep drag and Thing One pushed aside his coat, a gun firmly holstered on his left side. "So again, this chat was long overdue, so maybe it's time we cut the pleasantries, don't you think?"

He strode to Billy, the other at his side, his hand never very far from the gun. Thing Two glanced at Billy's cigarettes with a smirk. "Hm, always figured you were a Malberos man. You know what they say about assumptions." The other three stepped forward, stood in a line together, and even if Billy couldn't see it, were likely armed as well. "We have a few ground rules to go over, Mr. Hargrove, and you need to listen very carefully, understand?"

Billy scowled when he was called Mr. Hargrove again, about to snap back, and then sort of stumbled over his response when he saw the gun. He stared at it and then tensed as the men began to literally cage him against his Camaro. He tried really fucking hard to stand his ground, to not budge, but then that asshole said something about his cigarettes and he sneered.

"This is kinda unfair, don't you think?" Billy glanced over them again, his eyes falling to the holsters of some of their guns. He held his cigarette in between his fingers, almost forgetting about it at this point. "Fine. Fuck. What ground rules? And just so you know, I don't like being told what to do." He flicked his cigarette then, at the asshole who commented about the brand he smoked, not caring if it hit him.

It fell at his feet, but the man just kept smiling at him. After all, Billy was just a fucking kid who was outnumbered 5-1, what did he have to worry about? It was meant to be unfair, unlike any sort of the rules of street fighting. Billy wasn't meant to stand a chance. "Since the incident has come to light, my supervisors have been working

to...take the proper precautions. Keep you kids in line, so to speak. Now, the little ones, well, they're little. Like you sister, Maxine. Non-disclosure agreements aside, she seems like she's the type to keep her mouth shut. *But* now you older ones...well, you went to the body twice for a reason." He tsked and stepped even closer to Billy. Thing One's hand took out his gun, but held it pointing at the ground.

"We need to be very, very careful when dealing with disobedient teenagers. Unruly, really. My superiors were quite unhappy with Mr. Byers and Ms. Wheeler, but some people..." He sighed and shook his head, "Some people don't get with the program, Mr. Hargrove. Some people have to *learn* to obey, the hard way. And frankly, *you* seem like one of those people. Isn't that a lesson your father tried to teach you?" He took a long, deep drag on his cigarette, casually blew the smoke in Billy's face.

Billy's eyes tracked to the guy who was talking, but then flipped over as soon as he noticed the gun sliding out of its holster. His heart sped up and his brain began to fucking flip. He didn't want to get shot. Jesus Christ. He leaned back against the driver's door of his car, his palms pressing against the metal as the guys stepped closer to him. Shit. His gaze swept back to the first guy and he froze. Just fucking froze at the mention of his dad, of the lessons about obeying.

It was like a fuse went off as the smoke filled his nostrils, burned his eyes. Something broke in Billy's head and that same rage that had caused him to beat Steve's face in consumed him. "What the fuck would you know about it?" He snapped, but before he could actually wait for a response, he was lunging forward and throwing his fist across the guy's jaw. And although it was five on one, Billy knew he threw a fucking wicked punch, and he knew that it would hurt for *days* . The fucker deserved it for his comment about his dad, no matter what the consequence was of him slugging the asshole.

There was a mad scramble then, Thing Two fell back, but the three others raced towards Billy. The man with the gun quickly tackled Billy and he landed hard on his back in the gravel. The stones dug into his wounds, but the blood was pumping as they struggled to contain and control Billy. One of them kicked him hard in the stomach as one of the women managed to jerk him back, dragged up him across the gravel with his arm wretched painfully far back

behind him. There was some blood in his mouth, he cut his lip, when Thing Two groaned and stood up slowly. His nose was broken, clearly broken with blood running down his face and chin, but he wasn't cocky looking anymore. Billy was wrong. It wasn't Thing One, it was Thing Two. He looked just Neil before he ripped out his earring and cut his hair. Crazy, insatiable in a way that demanded blood and pain-- *true pain*.

He wheezed, "Stand him up." The other four obeyed, jerked Billy up by his arm until it felt like it might pop out of the socket. They wouldn't care if they broke his arm, they wouldn't care if he was dead. Billy was just a kid in the way. Thing Two grabbed Billy, and for a moment it seemed like he was going to be hit. Billy was used to that. Being hit was part of his life. He would recover and get hit again, it was as certain as the sun rose and set. But instead the man grabbed his jaw, jerked his mouth open as Billy was held there. He held out his hand, and no words were spoken when Thing One handed his gun over and the muzzle was pressed past Billy's lips. "Open up- **OPEN UP --**"

Billy grunted as he hit the ground and his body burned. He didn't give a shit, though, and he fucking fought until he was back on his feet, pain searing through his arms at being held back at such a fucking awkward angle. He struggled and snarled until the gun was pressed against his lips. Immediately, his struggles stopped. His breath hitched in his throat and his eyes became wide, clearly in disbelief. He hadn't thought the guys would use an actual gun on him. He was a fucking teenager, but then the realization that he was expendable also dawned on him. He wasn't a kid who would be missed, or noticed by family that he was gone. And that's when he realized he may have fucked up.

Slowly, Billy parted his lips and opened his mouth. He was panting, his eyes still wild and now wet with tears as he stood, fucking pinned with a gun to his mouth.

He cocked the gun and reached up, tangled his fingers in Billy's hair as he held him there, breathing so hard his breath fanned over Billy's face just like the smoke had moments ago. "Do you think that we're going to let you little bastards run us ragged? Do you think you have any idea of what you're up against, what we are willing to do to keep

your fucking mouth shut?” With that, he pushed the gun further into Billy’s mouth, the metal resting on his tongue. “You have no idea, you piece of shit. You’re fucking **nothing** compared to us. Tell me how you’re nothing.” Without waiting for Billy, he tightened his grip on his curls, jerked his head up and down as his teeth clacked on the barrel of the gun.

“Now, the girl and Byers...shit happens. Once, we can let it go. Heat of the moment. You understand that, don’t you, *Billy* ?” He sneered, and waited for a response, his grip tightening.

Billy wanted to squeeze his eyes shut when he heard the gun being cocked, but he knew better. His heart hammered in his chest as the metal slid in further, resting on his tongue, the aim scratching the top of his mouth. He shuddered and swallowed, his throat bobbing as his eyes flickered up to the guy. Billy could tell his nose was broken. He could tell he did a number on the guy’s face, but he fucking knew that it was nothing compared to the metal in his mouth and the hand in his hair.

When Billy was jerked and his teeth hit the gun, he grimaced, terrified that the guy’s hand would slip and he’d blow his brains out. He couldn’t exactly pull back to respond, and he hated the fact that the gun was forcing saliva to pool, slicking the stupid thing. He glanced at the other guys surrounding them and then to the one in front and nodded. It was a short movement because he was paranoid of moving *too* much with that thing inside of his mouth.

“Now,” he cleared his throat and licked his lips, which swiped at the blood that ran from his nose. “These are the rules Billy, this is the program: you’re going to keep your fucking mouth shut. You, Billy, you’re not going sign a piece of paper you won’t listen to, because you’re going to listen to me now, kid.” He stepped impossibly close, pressed to Billy. He was essentially the same height but somehow he towered over Billy, just like Neil. “This,” he tilted the gun up, right against the roof of his mouth, “is what you’re going to listen to, right Billy?”

He slid the gun in further, past the point of it being remotely accommodating as he hissed at Billy in a low voice, “You want to play house and be a fruit? I don’t give a shit, kid. But you go to one

reporter, you think, 'Oh, I need to talk to somebody,' you step one *toe* out of line--" His eyes were narrowed, searched Billy's as he gagged, fought down bile in the back of his throat, "I will make you **watch** when I put this gun in little Maxine's and your queer little boyfriend's mouth when I blow their brains out all over you. Do. You. Understand."

Billy winced as the gun was tilted up, the actual barrel dragging over his mouth. He sucked in a harsh breath through his nose and tried to keep his composure as the guy spoke, even as he pushed the gun well passed what he could handle. He gagged and swallowed in an attempt not to throw up and he fucking *hated* the guy. He would burn them all to the fucking *ground* . His eyes snapped up, however, at the mention of Max and Steve.

When Billy blinked again, a few tears spilled down his cheeks. He blamed the constant gagging, but he knew better. He nodded as well as he could with the gun shoved down his throat, making sure that he made eye contact with the guy as he did. He understood. He fucking understood.

And suddenly, it was Neil all over again. Panic coiled into his gut and made him tremble. His lungs felt constricted and he struggled to breathe through his nose as his eyes began to flicker, losing their focus. Fuck. Fuck. A panic attack *now* ? Billy groaned and tried to struggle again, although it was weak. He needed to be let go. He needed his space. He didn't even want to fucking *run* at this point.

The gun was removed from his mouth quickly and Billy was unceremoniously dropped to the ground like he weighed nothing, even though he felt so heavy there. The other agents just stepped away as Billy sat there, crumpled next to his car, clearly no longer a threat. Thing Two handed the gun back to the other agent, who cleaned the muzzle in front of Billy, his eyes narrowed in disgust at Billy. "I want you to remember this, Billy. Because we are going to go away and you won't see us again. You're going to live a normal, little fucked-up life all over again and you'll never even know we're there. Not unless...you step out of line. And then...well, we won't think about that, will we?"

He smirked down at Billy and wiped his face, blood smeared over his

cheek. Billy may have broken his nose, but it would take longer for Billy to recover from this moment. "Be a good boy, for once in your life, Billy, hm? Let's go." He turned and the other man followed him without a single word, without another glance Billy's way. All of them entered the van and quietly drove away as quickly as they came, their wheels crunched on the gravel, until the sound gradually faded away.

Billy's arms ached as he fell to the ground. His whole body shook, though, his breathing rapid as he looked up and stared at the guy speaking to him. He didn't move, staying still until they were long gone. When they were, he slumped against the driver side door of the Camaro and closed his eyes, trying his best to ignore the tears that dripped down his face.

Slowly, Billy worked his jaw to get the kinks out of it before he willed himself to stand up. He swayed at first and rotated his arms. Shit. He was going to have new bruises. New fucking marks and how the fuck was he supposed to explain those to Steve? To Max? He took in a shuddering breath and yanked the door open. Fuck.

After climbing in, Billy stared at the water, at the dock, and then turned his engine on. He needed coffee. Or more cigarettes. Or booze. Booze would work, but he needed to pick up Max, and that wasn't for a while yet. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the steering wheel.

Shit.

Billy needed Steve. He put his car in reverse and then made his way out of the quarry. It was still early. He could probably catch Steve before he had lunch. He just... he had to see him, to make sure he was safe, to feel him again. He scowled and licked the blood over his teeth. He'd probably have to fucking apologize. Again.

Steve would be angry, really fucking angry, but if Billy also showed up like this, his concern would win out. Steve wouldn't talk shit to him, not like this, not after that. He would have to make sure he didn't give Steve a panic attack at school. The rational thing to do would be to wait until after hours to see him, or back at the house, but after what happened, it was hard to trust that somehow Steve

wasn't already hurt. What happened there was the serious shit, the *they* that Steve would talk about when he was in the throes of a breakdown. There couldn't possibly be anybody else that he was referring to.

Had any of them already come after Steve? It seemed like one of the key things Steve would have mentioned to Billy, so maybe he was just hyper-aware of it. He had mentioned Wheeler and Byers, so clearly they were also on their radar. There were just so many things that Billy didn't really know about, and now there was a threat, a threat against Max and Steve if he stepped out of line.

That man, agent, whatever, he would make good on his promise. The way he looked at Billy...it was a look Billy had seen so often on Neil, and that man would murder all of them if Billy pushed the issue.

The thought made Billy grit his teeth, and the pain from his new injuries flared. He reached up and touched along his jaw, his cheek. It had been a long time since he had been thrown into gravel. He forgot how much that shit fucking hurt. He brushed some of the dirt off, just now realizing that it was there. The anger began to bubble again, but he had to push it down. He had to bury it because there was nothing he could do. If he had to toe a line to keep Max and Steve safe? He would.

The parking lot to school was filled with shit cars, like it always was. Billy parked the Camaro across from the Beamer and let out a shaky breath. How was he going to find Steve? He reached down and patted his pack. Empty. Fuck him.

Slowly, Billy pushed the door to his Camaro open and got out. He could still taste the metal of the gun on his tongue, and that thought made his stomach coil. Honestly? Billy was surprised he didn't throw up with how far that thing had been shoved down his throat. He slammed the door shut and scowled.

What period was it? Third? Second? Billy didn't even know.

It was hard to tell how long he waited there before the bell rang for lunch. People filtered in and out, mostly seniors, who had off campus lunch privileges. Steve usually ate lunch in the cafeteria with Nancy

and Jonathan, though of course the dynamic had drastically changed since she broke up with him. Nancy shot him worried glances, but now with Billy, none of it bothered him. Jonathan wanted to eat outside and Nancy looked him over, tried to gauge his reaction.

Steve had just shrugged and said sure, and he could tell it surprised her. Obviously he couldn't tell them about Billy, not yet anyway, and he was sure there would confusion and maybe...even a little disgust, but Steve was fine with it. King Steve was gone and the only thing he was interested in was chasing his own happiness.

They left from the front in order to head to the bleachers, it was a little nippy out, but Steve was wearing his jacket and talking animatedly to Nancy about his English teacher, who really had it out for him. (Seriously, she made it a point to ask him shit in every class she knew he wasn't going to know the answer to. Why do the fucking song and dance unless she hated him? That was Steve's point.) He swept out his arm in a large gesture, mimicking her surveying her sea of students in order to pick on Steve when he spotted the Camaro and Billy against it.

Steve actually stumbled in surprise, earning him a "Steve!" to his right from Nancy. He was sure Mike mentioned to Nancy something about the other night and Nancy just refused to address it. Steve was sure Nancy was waiting for Steve to approach him, but he had no intentions of doing that anytime soon. He wasn't going to break Billy's confidentiality by talking to Nancy. "Uh, I'll be right back." Steve began to jog over to Billy on the parking lot, his sunglasses balanced on his head.

Billy was struggling with himself, debating on what to do, where to go, how to find Steve. His hands were shaking as he took out his pack of smokes and removed one. He patted his jacket and froze. Shit. He must have dropped it at the quarry when he was getting his ass dragged over the gravel. He scowled and yanked the cigarette out of his mouth. Frustration made him want to punch something, but as he looked up, he hesitated.

Steve was jogging toward him. Steve was okay. He was in one piece. His head wasn't blown out. He took in a sharp breath and his shoulders relaxed. Fuck. Steve was okay. He licked his lips and

walked forward, ignoring the way his gait had changed after being tossed around. When he managed to step up to Steve, meeting somewhere in the middle, Billy looked over his face, as if evaluating if he was real, if he *was* okay.

“Hey, princess,” Billy murmured, resisting the urge to slide his fingers through Steve’s hair. He was sure he wouldn’t appreciate blood in his locks.

Steve’s eyes widened when he finally met up with Billy, about to ask what he was doing here, when he saw Billy’s face. Steve looked him over and his chest rose as he sharply inhaled. What Steve thought was *Neil*. Fucking Neil had found Billy, beat him up to punish him for court, got out of jail and just laid into his son. Steve was suddenly hyper aware of the eyes on them, everybody knew Billy was out of school. When a guy likes to make his presence constantly known, they would notice when you were gone.

“Get...get in the car and drive.” Steve shakily whispered. He didn’t wait for Billy to respond as he hurried around the passenger side, yanked open the door and slid down into the seat. His entire body started to thrum of life. Steve would fucking kill him. No Hopper. If Hopper didn’t work, his methods didn’t work, he would just take his fucking bat—take his bat and drive it right into his arms. Make it so Neil Hargrove couldn’t even lift a hand in anger, not even a *finger* , against Billy.

Billy saw the way Steve looked at him and wondered if it was actually that bad. It had felt awful, sure, but he hadn’t even looked in his rearview mirror to determine how messed up he looked. Hell, his hair was probably a mess again. He hesitated as Steve walked around him and got into the car. Fuck. He was about to get lectured again.

Slowly, Billy opened his driver side door and got in. He did so carefully, easing down into the seat and held his breath before he shut the door. He turned the Camaro’s engine over and popped into reverse. After getting onto the road, his eyes danced around the road, behind him, in front of him, paranoia making his stomach ache.

“Steve...” Billy hesitated and looked over. “Before you say anything, before--before you fuckin’ go off on me, I just... *They* found me.”

17. Chapter 17

Summary for the Chapter:

Next up is some smut and a time jump. Hold onto this fluff kids, hold on tight.

Steve kept his eyes on the road, his mind raced with thoughts of what he would do to Neil before Billy actually spoke. He turned his head sharply at Billy's admission, and for a second, Steve swore that his heart stopped beating. He wasn't even thinking when he quickly leaned over and grabbed the wheel, jerked it *hard* to the pull over lane of the road as he turned to face Billy.

Maybe Billy was going to yell at him, wanted to yell at him, his mouth was open and he was saying *something* but Steve was up, knelt up on the front seat and his head was touching the car roof.

Steve's ears were ringing loudly, and he could just hear blood, and not Billy as he took the blonde's face in his hands, scrutinized the broken skin, the small cuts. Less physical damage than Neil, but not less powerful. Steve's hands shook just as hard as his breathing as he stared at Billy.

Billy swore, loudly, when Steve yanked his wheel. He managed to park the car, his heart hammering in his chest. He looked over, ready to fucking scream at Steve about how fucking *unsafe* that was, his heel digging into the brake and his hands shaking. But when he saw Steve's expression, he froze. He didn't actually move, then, sitting still in his seat as Steve knelt over him and forced his face into his hands.

At first, Billy grimaced, his lips parting, as if he were going to protest. Whatever he said died on his lips as he stared at Steve, saw the fear in his eyes, the actual *threat* that he knew was there when Billy told him that they had found him. He licked along his teeth, tasting metal and blood, and knew why Steve was frightened. He knew why he was checking for more damage.

For once, Billy was speechless. He was caught off guard and still

wired from being thrown around, from having a gun down his throat. He reached up and slid his hands over Steve's chest. He tugged at his shirt, pulling him forward so he could press their lips together. As soon as they kissed, Billy shuddered and tightened his grip on Steve's shirt.

Steve let out a shaky breath against Billy's lips before kissed him back, slowly, and he whimpered against his lips when he tasted the familiar tang of blood on his tongue. Steve's brow knitted in pain, actual pain at the thought of Billy being touched, being hurt by those fucking people.

He both melted and collapsed slowly against Billy, *into* Billy, was what he felt, as his hands slid up and over the top of the seat. He was shaking and even as he extended his arms out in the distance, he balled his hands into fists. Steve couldn't even appreciate he managed to avoid a full fledged panic attack, even as he could barely hear or think of anything but Billy being hurt. He whispered into Billy's mouth, over and over again, "I'll kill them, I'll kill them, I'll kill them, I'll kill them Billy—"

Billy tried not to tense when Steve whimpered. He hated that he caused him distress. He hated that Steve was obviously furious. He moved his hands from Steve's shirt to his neck and then to his face. He cupped his cheeks in his palms, mirroring Steve's move, and dipped his tongue over Steve's lower lip. His breath was unsteady, and he wasn't sure if it was from kissing Steve or his own residual panic from what had just happened to him.

Then, Steve was mumbling into his mouth and Billy hissed. He pulled back just enough to look up at Steve, to stare at him, and there was something in Billy's eyes that he didn't want to name. "Steve, Steve, listen to me. Please," he stroked his thumbs over the tops of Steve's cheeks. "Don't. Don't go near them. Don't get their attention. Don't." Billy hadn't signed any papers, no, but the thought of Steve's and Max's brains exploded across him certainly sent the message home.

And the fucking gun in his mouth.

"Can you do that for me, baby? Just... I'm okay. Just a little roughed up," which didn't explain why Billy was terrified, why his voice

wavered, but he kept his eyes on Steve's despite the fact that Billy remembered having that metal on his tongue.

Steve made a keening whine, his brow furrowed as his face rested against Billy's and gently butted against his cheek. It was painfully, physically fucking painful, for Billy to pull him from that place. It would be hard to think of Steve as somebody who would do that, hurt people, but Billy had seen him with Neil. With the bat. If Billy and Max hadn't been there, Steve would have fought him. Steve would have *hurt* Neil for Billy. And now, Steve would hurt *them* for Billy.

Steve bit his lower lip and closed his eyes tightly as Billy pulled at him, spoke softly to him. He couldn't refuse Billy, not when he asked Steve like that. His voice was thick and his tongue felt heavy. His vision swam but Billy's voice was his life jacket that he cling to, as Billy pulled him up to safety, "Yeah, I can do that..."

"Okay, okay, good," Billy slumped, his shoulders sagging as relief washed over him. He touched along Steve's face again, through his hair, and then clasped the back of his neck. He pulled him forward, into another kiss, as if he was making sure Steve was there with him, in his arms, safe and okay from those goddamn suits. His kissing became almost desperate, and as he shifted in the driver seat, he pulled the e-brake and eased Steve back against the passenger side door.

"You here with me, baby?" Billy pulled back enough to look at Steve again, brushing his knuckles over Steve's cheek. He moved his hands down Steve's body, touching, feeling, and it wasn't even fucking sexual. It was as if Billy was making sure he was okay, feeling for any injuries that he couldn't see. "Jesus..." He was mumbling to himself now.

Steve returned the kiss with equal fervor, dragged his fingertips all over Billy's body until he slumped against the door, bonelessly, with Billy above him. It took him a long time to nod, just felt Billy's lips and his hands. Billy parting his jacket, touching along his ribs and stomach. Steve's eyes were so heavy as he laid back there, silent as fingers pressed into his flesh. Burned and prodded him.

Steve's head rested against the window as he took the took in the blonde. His voice was low, but not soft. If anything, Steve sounded pained, hard to assess what happened to Billy, "Where did they touch you? Tell me."

Billy looked up at Steve, having basically been bent over him. He hesitated and licked his lips. He needed to consider what he should tell him, but he also had to consider the fact that they *trusted* each other, and Billy needed to be okay with that. It was hard, and he hated being vulnerable, but Steve needed to know. If Billy ended up having a panic attack or a nightmare, and Steve found out he left shit out? He'd be in trouble.

"I was thrown to the ground and they had a pretty good grip on my arms," Billy sucked at his teeth and then frowned. "I uh. I know what a gun tastes like now." He offered meekly, avoiding Steve's eyes as he looked over Steve's chest, his stomach. He was purposefully trying to make it a lot less terrifying than it was, although he felt fucking *haunted* . "Told me--I gotta stay in line, or they'd.." He stroked his thumbs over Steve's stomach, unable to finish his sentence.

Steve's breath quickened again, like he would start drowning all over again through Billy's words as he screwed his eyes tightly shut. His exhaled shakily, several times, in order to calm down, in order to fucking think about anything *but* that happening to Billy.

"No, no you don't." Steve gently pulled Billy against him, his legs parting accommodate Billy's body. "You don't know what a...gun tastes like. You know what *I* taste like, right? You know what I taste like. Kiss me, please—" Steve fisted his hands in Billy's shirt and kissed him deeply first, his lips parting as he groaned softly in his mouth. Steve wasn't even sure if this was for Billy, for himself, or the both of them. Steve wanted it all gone, wanted Billy to forget all of it but him, and all Steve wanted was to forget somebody could fucking do that to somebody he cared so much about.

Billy started shaking because Steve was obviously freaking out and trying to calm himself down. He looked up again, his own breath scattered as Steve pulled him into another kiss. He opened his mouth and slid his tongue into Steve's mouth, tasting him, pulling him in. Despite that, though, the metallic, steel of the gun stayed on his

tongue, and it made him tremble to think that maybe he couldn't get the fucking taste out.

"Sorry," Billy breathed into Steve's mouth. He wasn't even sure what he was sorry for. "I had to see you. I had to make sure..." He dug his fingers underneath Steve's shirt and then slid his hands up his stomach. He stroked the skin, panting against Steve's mouth as the adrenaline from earlier raced through his veins again. "I was *scared* , Steve. I was so fucking..." He broke the kiss and dropped his forehead against Steve's shoulder, taking in uneven, short breaths.

"It's okay, I understand, I would..." Steve would want to see Billy too. Steve shuddered as Billy touched him, once again trying to feel that something was amiss since Billy couldn't see anything. Steve swallowed and pressed his forehead back.

"I'm not mad at you, I just...I feel like I dragged you into this by being..." Fucked up. If he wasn't like this, it just would have been a night of drinking, of awkward touches. Steve tightened his fingers around his shirt. "I want *this* , more than anything, I just...fuck Billy, if you get hurt because of me—you **did** get hurt because of me...!"

He reached up and tucked down hair behind Billy's ear, "They followed Nancy and Jonathan before, before they got the story out about Barbara. I don't know how long it's been going on, or how much..."

"If we have any chance of staying together, of... figuring this shit out, I would have found out eventually, Steve," Billy murmured. "Between your nightmares and your panic attacks, it would have come out. I just..." He hesitated and then leaned back to look at Steve.

"I broke the guy's face," Billy laughed at that and shook his head. "Broke his damned nose. He was bleeding all over the place. It's when I got real acquainted with his buddy's gun." He paused and turned his head to kiss Steve's palm. If it had been anyone else touching his hair, he'd have moved away.

It was weird how much could change in just a few days. "But he was serious. He reminded me..." He frowned. "Reminded me of Neil. Told me to behave, or they'd use the gun on you and Max." He pressed his

lips together and then chuckled, although this time it was hollow. "Way to make me bend, right?"

Steve swallowed hard and his jaw tightened. He looked away, he hadn't considered something like that, them being used against one another. Steve would have broke under that pressure, done whatever they wanted just to keep Billy and the rest of the brats safe.

And Billy had mentioned staying together, making this work. Steve knew what Billy wanted, but it was the first time the blonde fully acknowledged something beyond this being just sexual, articulated a real *relationship*. Steve was quiet before he reached out and pulled Billy against him. Steve wasn't going to let Neil Hargrove anywhere near Billy, but how the fuck was he going to protect Billy from them? From the Upside Down?

His voice was soft as he rested his cheek on the top of Billy's hair, "Sometimes I think this crazy, right? Us just...so fucking fast. Like nobody, nobody else would think this is normal. But it just..." Steve whispered, "You're just so fucking real, Billy, sometimes when I can't breathe and I can't think and you're just...the only thing that's *real* and the only thing that matters."

Billy was tempted to say something, anything to get that look off of Steve's face, but before he could, Steve pulled him down and wrapped his arms around him. He blinked, somewhat surprised by how affectionate it was, even if they were cramped in the Camaro. He settled his cheek on Steve's chest, his knees bent to the side so that he could literally just lie on top of the taller male.

"I'm pretty fucking real," Billy mumbled and chuckled. He stroked Steve's side, his fingers still planted beneath his shirt. "But... I get what you're saying, I guess. I went from having--fucking *no one* --to you. That shit's weird, Harrington, especially since you seem to care so much." He stared at the dash of his car. "I haven't... had that since my mom, I don't think? You have that same look in your eyes that she did. I haven't seen it anywhere else. Not directed at me, anyway."

"I'm pretty sure my intentions are less pure than your Mom..." Steve joked softly as he rested his hands on Billy's back. Billy was going to have to ask Steve to clean that later, clean any wounds he wasn't

aware of. And Steve would do it.

Steve's side clenched a little and he made a soft, strangled noise, squirmed just slightly. "You can't—fuck okay, from earlier? I am like a little ticklish, and you can't do that right *now* , so I'm giving you this information so you will temporarily retreat your weapons. Babe, please?" Steve implored, using the little name he reserved for more intimate moments between them. He didn't want Billy to think he was laughing at him, though he loathed to admit something he was sure Billy would later exploit.

Billy paused when Steve squirmed and made that *noise* . He looked up, caught between surprise and amusement. "If I wasn't hurting, you'd be in trouble." Billy squeezed Steve's side and slowly eased up off of his body. He grimaced as he did and sank into the driver's seat again. "Can we go back to your place? I still have a while before I need to pick up Max, and..."

And Billy didn't want to be alone. Not right now. The reality from earlier still swirled in his brain, and if he could keep an eye on Steve for a while? He'd take it.

Steve nodded as he sat up into place and sighed, a little relieved Billy wasn't pinning him down after his admission. "Yeah okay, just swing by later so I can pick up my car." Steve settled into his seat and buckled himself in, he would probably get detention tomorrow for ditching, but he didn't really give a shit. It was more Nancy that he worried about, she would have questions.

"Uh, so, I wanted to ask you something." Steve inquired, felt a little nervous as he picked at his jeans.

Billy looked over as he lifted the e-brake. He pulled the car back onto the road and wished he had an auto, just for a moment, so he could hold Steve's hand instead of shift his gears. "Yeah?" He kept his eyes on the road, a little more than he would normally because, no matter what front he puts up, or what he says, the run in with those assholes was fucking frightening.

It may take *weeks* to get that taste out of his mouth, and even then, having the barrel shoved down his throat wasn't something he was

going to forget.

“I just...what do you want me to tell Nancy about this?” Steve blurted out and immediately winced, he didn’t want Billy to think it was because he still had feelings for Nancy. He deeply cared about her, but wasn’t thinking about her the same way he thought about Billy. But Steve didn’t want to say it exactly that way, because Billy knew how much Nancy meant to him and if he said Billy was maybe more, that would be a *thing*. So he started to ramble instead, “I don’t mean like...I’m cheating on her with you or anything, I just, I *mean* because I think she knows you’re staying with me, but doesn’t know why, and she gets worried. And I could lie, but I’m not good at it--she can just *always* tell when I’m lying, and then it becomes a thing where she’s going to get Byers involved. And they’ll be nosy and I...might-okay, I might cave, so I need *you* to tell *me* what’s okay and what’s not okay to say.”

Steve chewed on his lower lip, glanced over at Billy, and before Billy could actually speak, he just continued, “Because, okay, there’s your and Max’s situation, and then there’s you staying with me, and then there’s us, so that’s three- *three* things. Well, I guess maybe the second and third are kinda together, maybe? But I mean, maybe I can sell I’m just helping you out.” Steve paused and then shook his head, “No, no I can’t sell that. So you have to tell me.”

Billy furrowed his brow as he listened to Steve. He tried to take what he was saying, to think through it, but his mind was a haze and he just wanted to fucking lie down. He reached up and rubbed his hand over his eyes for only a second before looking at the road again. Nancy? What should they even tell her? What were they? Was there a label for it? Sure, there fucking was. But how could someone like Nancy be convinced that this was something *real* after such a short period of time? Billy didn’t like her, but she was fucking smart.

“Steve...” Billy eased the car into Steve’s driveway and slumped back into his seat. He stared at the house and tapped his thumb against the wheel. “I don’t... know. I mean. I think this is more than just... sex? But...” He had issues with labels because of his father. He had issues with what they were because he knew how people would look at Steve. Even if being gay was okay, Steve was with Billy fucking Hargrove. He wasn’t exactly a treasure to be with.

“What do you want to tell her, Steve? About us? What do you *think* we should be? Or what we are?” Billy turned his engine off and shifted so that he was facing Steve, his hands itching to reach out. He waited, though, wanting a clear answer. “I don’t care if she knows about Neil. Or Max. I don’t care what you fucking tell her because this is a small town and that shit is going to get out eventually when Neil’s arrest history comes out. But us? What do you want us to be?”

Steve frowned a little and fidgeted in the seat. It wasn’t that Nancy would shun him, she wasn’t really like that. She would be surprised, but hell, even Steve was surprised sometimes. And it’s like he could say they were dating, because they hadn’t dated yet. Almost skipped all of that, which was yet another strange thing Steve just realized. And he couldn’t exactly say, ‘Oh Nance, sometimes we make out and Billy gives me really amazing head. You should try it sometime.’

“Uh, well. I guess I kinda...wanna say we’re together, maybe...?” It wasn’t specific but it also still had a very clear meaning. Steve swallowed and looked at Billy nervously. Together usually meant exclusive. That he was exclusively in a queer relationship with Billy fucking Hargrove. “I don’t know if you...that’s what I want though...and I guess to tell her you’re not beating my ass or something.” Steve murmured, though it wasn’t as if their fight was a secret amongst the members of the Party.

Billy gazed at the house and let his thoughts roll through his head. He could see himself saying they were together. He could see himself with his arm hooked around Steve’s waist, daring anyone to touch him. He could also see himself being aggressively possessive, and he wasn’t sure how Steve would take that one. His hands dropped into his lap and he ran his palms over his jeans, as if he were wiping off sweat from being nervous (he was).

“I... okay. We’re together,” Billy chanced a glance over to Steve, watching him carefully before averting his gaze. “We’re together, Steve. I’m okay with that.” He reached over and slid his fingers over Steve’s leg, up to his thigh. “And this means shit coming from me, but I will... fucking try my hardest never to lay a hand on you like that again.” He meant it, too.

Steve had told him he didn’t want him turning into his father. He

didn't, either.

Steve's eyes widened as he looked back over at Billy. Billy's reputation still meant something, despite whatever his father did. Nobody was going to say something to Billy about Neil, not if they wanted to keep their fucking teeth. And even if they just kept it between Nancy and Jonathan, because Nancy would tell him, it was still a huge fucking deal. After everything, Steve didn't think Billy would actually hurt him, but the guys had demons to keep at bay. Steve had his own. He laughed once, his eyes a little wet, and Steve smiled warmly as he quickly moved over and pressed himself against Billy in the car.

He half crawled on top of him to throw his arms around Billy's neck and Steve kissed him deeply, his ass laid into the horn once until he arched forward to press himself flush against his body. It wasn't what Steve expected. An actual declaration this was *something* , a something that if asked, there was a small group of people beyond Max and Hopper that would know about this shit.

Billy paused at the laugh and then grunted as Steve threw his arms around him. He reached down along the side of his seat and flicked a button. It eased his seat back so that Steve had more room to crowd him, to get as close as he physically wanted to Billy without blowing the horn or becoming uncomfortable. As he did that, though, Billy didn't break the kiss. He cupped one hand on Steve's face and held him there, his tongue ventured into the other's mouth and explored him thoroughly again.

It didn't matter that lying on the seat hurt his back or that his skin still stung from the gravel. Steve was there, *on top of him* , and he was able to just forget what had happened earlier. Steve's safety came first, and that thought clarified something really fucking monumental for Billy: he cared for Steve--more than he had for any other human being in a long time.

"Hey," Billy muttered, breaking their kiss to look over Steve's face. "I--I really, really like you." He smiled a little and ran his thumb over Steve's lower lip. "I know it's not... some Shakespearean shit, but..."

Steve smiled impossibly wide and laughed again, gently and playfully

bit at Billy's thumb, "Me too...!" He kissed Billy in a succession of quick kisses before he melted against the blonde to properly kiss him deeply. Steve's heart pounded excitedly as he smiled against Billy's lips.

All of this was a big deal for both of them, and admitting it together felt monumental. Steve expected Billy to reject him or deflect, he knew it wasn't sincere, because Steve knew what he felt between them, but he expected Billy to laugh at him. To tell Steve that Nancy should fuck off, it was none of her business, which was true, but not what Steve would do. It wasn't like Steve was going to shout this from the rooftops, he wasn't stupid and knew being *careful* was important. But it was just Billy, who had been hurt so much that to admit he had feelings for Steve made his heart swell happily.

Steve arched his hips slowly to find the perfect angle to kiss Billy, explore his mouth and be explored in return. He poured his heart into the kiss, to show Billy just how grateful he was. ' *Together, we're together.* '

If Billy had known that saying those simple damn (not simple, never simple) words would cause Steve to act like this, he would have done it before now. Granted, this had only lasted a couple of days at most, but *Billy* and *exclusive* had never really been paired before. He found that he didn't mind, though, especially as Steve kissed him lightly a few times. Then, they were *really* kissing, and Billy was glad that he had laid the seat back because *fuck* Steve was on top of him and he liked that.

Billy carded his fingers through Steve's hair, pushing it back and messing it up. He was sure Steve would care later, but right now? Fuck it. He opened his mouth for Steve, letting him do as he liked while his other hand slid over his chest and stomach. This time, it wasn't to check for wounds or injuries. No, he scratched over Steve's nipple, through the shirt, and then reached down to yank the hem up. When his hand found warm skin, Billy sighed into Steve's mouth and then brushed the back of his knuckles over Steve's nipple, listening, gauging how he'd respond.

Steve gasped, paused their kisses for just a moment to catch himself, before he kissed him fiercely again. He sucked Billy's lower lip

greedily as his nipples slowly hardened under the crisp Fall air and Billy's touches. Billy was far more leisurely than Steve, took his time as Steve shuddered hard in pleasure and rolled his hips on top of him.

He wasn't really sure how Billy kept his cool so often, when all he did to Steve was burn him up, make him want *more* . When Billy opened his mouth, Steve whimpered and took it, slid in his tongue to touch and then suck hard on Billy's own, tried to push the blonde for more, for him to go faster, to touch him *more* . Steve always wanted more.

Billy breathed in deeply as Steve gasped. He felt heat pool into his gut, his cock hardening behind his jeans. He pinched the nub gently at first, rolled it in between his fingers before he brushed the pad of his thumb over him. They hadn't actually had sex yet, and Billy wasn't exactly sure when they would, but he couldn't wait to hear Steve's noises as he fell apart. He groaned at that thought, his voice muffled into Steve's mouth.

Part of the reason Billy took it easy, took it slow, is because Steve had told him to-- *several times* . That, and Billy liked teasing. He liked watching Steve get frustrated and demanding. Knowing he could do that to Steve? That was enough for Billy to make Steve beg for anything he wanted. He moved the hand that had been messing with Steve's nipple down to his jeans. He pushed him back enough to unbutton and unzip his jeans.

It didn't escape him that he and Steve were doing this in Steve's driveway, of all places, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Steve leaned back obediently and licked his lips as he watched Billy's hand. His back hit the horn again once before Steve straightened his back up, breathing harder in the car. He bit down on his lower lip as he watched himself, he purposely rolled his hips for Billy then, knew he was being watched, like how Billy always watched him.

Normally, the shit Billy said to him was embarrassing as hell. Nobody else talked to Steve like that, and for Billy, who didn't always communicate well, he was downright chatty when the blonde had his blood pumping. Steve's voice was thick as he asked, "What are you gonna do to me..."

Billy muffled his laugh as the car horn went off again. He was almost tempted to yank Steve forward so he'd stop that shit, but instead, he dipped his fingers below the hemline of Steve's boxers and wrapped them around his cock. He stroked twice and then brushed his thumb over the head. He was impressed with the pre-cum already there, and he pulled his hand back so he could lick the bead off of his fingers. He grinned at Steve as he did.

"That depends on what you're up for," Billy mused, returning his hand to Steve's cock to stroke him again. "You're always telling me to slow down, baby. I'm just doing as you said," the flash in his eyes obviously meant he was taunting, though, goading Steve to talk to him.

Steve groaned loudly when Billy touched him and Steve arched his hips up when he moved his hand away. Fucking teasing him all the time. Steve hadn't wanted Billy to touch him the night before, wanted to be about Billy and Billy actually opening up to him, and now that he was being touched again, Steve felt a little crazed. Just being close to Billy did this to him, droze Steve insane.

Steve groaned again, but this time in frustration at Billy's smirking face. Billy knew he had him and Steve was too excited, too fucking needy to stop. He licked his lips and a flush came over his face, he knew what he wanted, and of course Billy was going to fucking make him ask for him. "We would have to go inside but what-what you did earlier. In the shower I mean, but before you....before the blowjob." Steve breath quickened, even admitting he really liked it was hard. It was just something he wasn't used to, but at the time it made him feel dizzy in the best way possible.

Billy's eyes widened as Steve asked for *that* . It wasn't that he didn't want to, or that he was remotely resistant. Now, he was just surprised that Steve would *ask* for it. He watched him and then smirked. Carefully, he eased up so he could brush his lips over Steve's jaw, his cheek, and then his lips. He tugged gently at his lower lip and tightened his grip around his cock.

"You want me to eat you out, pretty boy?" Billy stroked Steve again and brushed his thumb over the tip before pressing, smearing the liquid around the skin. "Is that what you want? 'Cause if it is, you

gotta get up so we can go inside. I'm not doing that here." He wanted to, though. God. He'd do anything to Steve in his car--but he'd prefer the house right now, where the positions could be more comfortable, especially considering his muscles ached.

Steve moaned, low and deep as his face twisted in pleasure as Billy stroked him, watched him, and Steve tried bite down on his lip. The feather light touches made him pant softly and Steve let out a low whine.

He remembered being pressed against the wall, Billy squeezing his ass and then his mouth and tongue were there and it was so fucking dirty to Steve— Steve let out a breathless plea, "Yes, yes, that's what I want—that's what I want—" He nodded and his hands shook a little in anticipation as he found the strength to open the driver door.

"Alright, baby. Gotta get up, then," Billy chuckled, his amusement obvious in his voice. He let go of Steve's cock and then, because he wasn't entirely a piece of shit, buckled his jeans back together so that Steve could stumble out without actually *falling out* of his jeans. He eased himself up and reached down to fix his seat.

"I need a shower, anyway," Billy leaned forward to kiss Steve, catching his lips for a quick kiss before he squeezed his hip. "Now get off of me so we can go inside, Steve."

Steve gently kissed him back and swallowed and exhaled a little shakily as he tried to compose himself. He slid off of Billy's lap and stood up, his face still flushed from his request. Once there was a little distance, he had a clearer head. It was just easy for him to get swept up with Billy and he idly wondered if the blonde felt the same. "Look um, maybe I got a little carried away, maybe it's better that you rest or something. I can just..." He flushed a little darker, not finishing that he could take of himself.

He looked over at Billy, his injuries seemed minor in comparison to Neil, but injuries compounded on top of injuries couldn't be helpful. He frowned a little as he looked over Billy in concern as they made their way into the house.

Billy waited until they were inside and he kicked the door shut to

respond to Steve. Instead of just talking, though, Billy crowded Steve against the wall. He planted a hand next to his head and looked over his face. "You asked me, Harrington. I told you I will, and I don't go back on my word." He leaned and pressed a kiss to the side of Steve's lips. "Let's make a deal."

As Billy spoke, he slid a hand over Steve's chest and stomach. He pressed his palm against Steve's cock and brushed his lips over Steve's ear. "Let me eat you out. Let me get you off, and then you can take care of me. I'll rest after that."

Billy squeezed Steve's clothed cock and stepped back. "Now. I'm going to the bathroom. You can follow *or* you can stay here. I'd rather have my mouth on you, though." He turned and walked to the stairs, his lips quirking as he began to climb them. He was sure Steve would follow. Even if he didn't let Billy do what he wanted, he'd still follow to help him with the injuries.

Steve's eyes were wide as Billy pressed him into the wall, god he really wanted Billy. He just was worried Billy pushed himself too hard, just like how Steve was panting hard then as Billy whispered in his ear right before he pushed off the wall and went upstairs.

If Steve didn't go to him, it had the potential of creating a rift where there didn't need to be one. He wanted to trust Billy-that he would stop if it became too much. Steve bit down on his lower lip before he quickly and mutely followed Billy upstairs. Billy was just fucking sinful, basically every aspect to him was sinful, and Steve felt like he was willing to follow him to the depths of Hell just to see that grin directed at him.

As soon as Billy got into the bathroom, he eased his shirt up and over his head. He wasn't sure how badly the gravel dug into his back. He also didn't care, but he knew Steve would want to clean whatever cuts were back there. His arms and back aches from being wrenched and dragged, but Billy was used to pain. To take off his boots, he leaned against the counter and tilted his legs up. Leaning down probably wasn't the best idea, so he unlaced and pulled his boots off that way.

Socks and jeans came next, leaving Billy naked. He rolled his

shoulders again, working those muscles that had been cramped before. A shower would do him some good. Also, Steve was a damned good distraction. He could watch the guy all night and forget about the various bruises and scrapes.

Although, what those men did earlier just left him with more questions, which fucking sucked since he *knew* he had to behave in order to keep Max and Steve safe.

Steve moved to begin stripping when Billy stripped first and Steve's eyes widened. There were little red marks all along Billy's entire back, red and raw, and his one shoulder had a massive bruise on it which was already a deep blue. The wounds could be cleaned but it was going to sting like hell and he did a sharp intake of breath staring at him, looking at those injuries and knowing that he hadn't been there to help Billy, fucking stop those people from hurting him.

He stepped forward, his brow knitted in concern, and his voice cracked softly, "Billy, really, it's okay to say no to me, I didn't know it was--" Steve swallowed hard, his mind already racing with all the touches and moments in the car. Steve knew Billy hated people making decisions for him, but everybody had limits. Steve's concern quickly outweighed his desire for more.

Billy paused and then glanced back at Steve. "Is it that bad?" He couldn't see his back, not easily. He shifted so that his back faced the mirror and looked over his shoulder. When he actually took in the damage, he froze. Okay. So, it had hurt, sure, but Billy had been in a rage and hadn't actually felt most of the cuts. The bruise, sure, that had been there. Maybe Billy was more used to pain than what was reasonable. He pursed his lips and rotated his shoulders again.

"That guy really did not appreciate his nose being broken," Billy leaned against the kitchen sink and breathed out slowly. Maybe he should reassess what he should be doing versus what he wanted to do. He wanted to make Steve squirm and moan and fall apart. That's what he wanted. His body, though? It obviously needed rest, no matter how much Billy hated to admit it.

"Fuck."

Steve bit his lip and sighed before he reached over to turn on the water, it couldn't be that hot though. Shower first and then clean the wounds. He was pretty sure he had enough band aids and first aid supplies--Steve tried to stock up at this point and with Billy here, he might need every more.

Steve make quick work of his clothes. "C'mon babe, shower first." He gave Billy a small, tight smile as he stepped past the glass door, only about half the shower spray actually getting him. If Billy had made them angry, they would watch them more closely, that was a given. For all Steve knew, that moment in the driveway might have had an audience. He sighed heavily.

"I really didn't think they were that bad," Billy protested. He didn't feel terrible. He felt as normal as he usually did, which included pain. It was a constant that sort of buzzed below his skin. His eyes trailed to the mirror again before he pushed off the counter and walked to the shower. "Seriously, Steve." Although, now Steve knew that they had thrown Billy around. Sure, he had told Steve that, but his back was clear evidence to how he had been tackled to the damned ground.

Billy stepped into the shower and hesitated. Shit. Putting his back under the water was going to sting like a bitch. "God damn it," he muttered, sticking his hand out to feel the temperature. "It's only scrapes, though, so they should heal up pretty quickly, right?" Still, the thought that they were being watched, especially Billy, made his skin crawl.

"Great news, kids. At least I didn't get my brains blown out," Billy was obviously tumbling toward some sort of 'fuck this' breakdown. He hadn't had one yet. Sure, he had been pissed and reserved about Neil and the shit Steve went through, but he hadn't felt well and truly cracked.

Not until that moment, anyway.

Steve watched him silently and carefully as Billy spoke, frowned as he realized Billy was trying to cope again with what happened. Steve exhaled and stepped under the spray, gingerly rested his arms onto Billy's shoulders as he slowly eased him under while he kept his gaze

locked onto the blonde.

"It's okay to need help from me, okay to rely on me, too, you know." He gently pushed back Billy's hair as it became wet before he kissed him sweetly and sighed against his lips. Steve wanted to hurt them. Billy had made him promise not to do that--not that Steve even knew what he could do, but he damn sure would have tried. If he had to hurt Neil Hargrove, Steve would have done so without a single regret. He deserved it, that's all there was to it. But this was incredibly dangerous, and not just for Billy and Steve.

"I didn't see any gravel there or anything, so I think your shirt mostly prevented it from getting in." If he had to drive Billy to the hospital again, Hopper would find out, and then Hopper would find out Billy knew. Steve couldn't risk that either, not yet.

Billy's hands started to shake as Steve tugged him under the spray. He flinched as the water spread down his back, but didn't actually make any noise. He wouldn't. Rarely with injuries was Billy noisy. That had only pissed Neil off even more, and that was something he avoided at all costs (usually).

"I can deal," Billy mumbled against Steve's lips. He had to. He was Billy Hargrove. He had dealt with his dad for *years*. There was absolutely no reason why he couldn't deal with this on top of it. Hell, Neil was pretty simple in comparison to what was going on here. He squeezed his eyes shut and tipped his head back, letting the water drip over his face.

When Billy finally tilted forward and opened his eyes, he looked at Steve. "Good. Can't have gravel in my back. It'd be the worst thing ever." His gaze flickered over Steve's face as he started to disassociate his emotions--putting them away like he did after a particularly harsh beating from Neil. It was how he fucking survived most times. Just--putting it to the side so he could deal with it later on, preferably on his own.

"Hey, *hey*, don't. Don't do that with me. I can see you, you know. Even if it's just here, just right now, and you need to do something else out there, don't do *that* when it's just me and you." Steve's brow furrowed even more and his voice was low as he caught Billy's gaze

again. Steve cupped his jaw for just a moment and pressed their foreheads together. "I'm not going to hurt you for it." Steve isn't entirely sure of all the things that Billy's had to do over the years, how Billy learned to stay safe, but Steve was sure this was one of them.

Steve's gaze dropped for a moment, ended his admonishment as he whispered to Billy, "Turn around, I'm going to get your back." He needed to protect Billy, but with Billy that meant protecting the blonde from himself. Steve just didn't know how to protect him from government officials when one stumbles into a massive cover-up. "Please, babe."

Billy almost closed his eyes, wanting to stave off any sort of eye-contact with Steve. He didn't, though, because he obviously hated himself. He watched Steve quietly and nodded. "I know--I know you wouldn't." *I'm sorry* . He grimaced at the thought. It was easy to apologize to Steve now. It was weird. He actually *meant it* , too. It wasn't just some bullshit he was pulling out of his ass.

"Yeah, okay," Billy clenched his fists and then relaxed. He forced himself to relax as he turned around. He stared at the shower wall, contemplating his next move. He wasn't looking at Steve now, at least, so he could perhaps talk. It was hard when he was looking into those too-pretty doe eyes.

"When they told me they'd kill you--you and Max. It's like... everything was pulled out of me. I couldn't even fucking think. I just did as he told me to," Billy glanced to the side and then chewed at the inside of his cheek. "Neil's shit? He was a small piece of scum. He beat a lot. These people?" Billy exhaled slowly. "They're... dangerous. A lot more dangerous than Neil."

Steve swallowed hard as he gently washed Billy's back. He grabbed a bar of soap and lathered it in his hands as he listened to him. Steve murmured a soft apology as he placed the soap there, heard Billy hiss and curse. He stilled for a moment, his own body tense, before he resumed cleaning Billy.

He understood Billy, really. It was something he reflected about often enough with Nancy and Barbara, but of course, Nancy hadn't listened

to Steve. She was convinced they had killed her by being together. Steve told her enough times it wasn't true, but never fully believed it himself either. It was just the act of making it right, and Steve knew it was right, was costly and dangerous. And there were fucking kids involved. If they were willing to hurt children, keep them as experiments, hurting any them wasn't really a problem. Anything to keep this whole mess under wraps.

"I just..." Steve rested his forehead against the back of Billy's neck, silent before he softly said, "I used to think about it all the time. Nancy really..wanted to tell Barbara's parents. We would go and have dinner every week and the guilt just ate her up and I didn't...fault her for that, but I just also knew--" Steve's hand traveled to Billy's touching softly. "Not all monsters look like demogorgons and weird plant creatures. And some of them know how to hide in plain sight, and nobody will believe you, or listen..."

Steve's voice was thick, "I can't lose you either. I don't care what I have to do to keep you safe, I'll do it."

Billy wanted to move away from the soap, but he let Steve clean him, let him wash the wounds out. The burn and sting at least grounded him, for now, his emotions not so far away at this point. He parted his lips and hesitated, uncertain as to what or how he should respond to Steve. His fingers twitched and he grit his teeth. He should have just given Steve pleasure, fuck the pain, and went to bed. This was just too fucking personal for him.

"I told you, Steve," Billy muttered, "If you were trying to get things going with Nance in the room, it wasn't your fault. You didn't tell her to go to the pool. You didn't even know what was in it, right? How could you be at fault? I don't understand how she doesn't get that." He huffed and then shifted so he could turn around and face Steve again.

"You know it's the same for you, right?" Billy reached out and tipped Steve's head so he could look at him properly. "I'll do whatever I have to in order to keep you safe. Anything." He hesitated and then laughed a little. "It's like those fucking movies, right? Something out of this world brings two unlikely people together, all that shit..." He chewed at his lower lip, obviously nervous about how honest and

forward he was being.

Steve grinned at him and draped his arms around Billy's shoulders as he slid his hand up the back of his hair. "Am I the dashing hero and you're the villain?" He pressed his forehead to Billy's and Steve knew the best way to keep Billy on this side of sane was to distract him. It was fine with Steve, he understood the need for distractions, and hell, this worked for him too. The last thing he wanted to think about was Billy in that position, scared for Steve and Max.

Steve started to wonder just how unlikely Billy was compared to him. They were incredibly different, of course, but there was a methodology to Billy Hargrove that Steve felt like he mostly understood him--even if he got new information about the guy now and then. Billy wasn't some muscle-bound asshole who enjoyed beating the shit out of people, he reacted to his stress. Throwing a punch and shoving somebody away was easy for Billy, but it wasn't Billy at his core.

And of course Steve knew on a basic level that he and Nancy hadn't killed Barbara. He was sure she knew that too, but he was also deeply sure both of them would always feel the same, deep down. The guilt ate them both up, drove them apart. Not to mention that there had always been something between her and Jonathan. In his more sobering moments before Billy came along, Steve just thought it was one of those "meant to be things" that he had no right to stand in the way of. Steve grinned even wider at Billy's admission, looked over his face. Maybe Billy was *his* "meant to be thing."

Steve pressed a little closer to Billy, hovered his lips over the blonde's. "So now that I lured you away from the dark side, are we gonna rule the galaxy together or what, Hargrove? Thought you wanted to be my King." His tone was soft, teasing, it was time to take care of Billy, rather than how much this world was willing to hurt the both of them.

Billy couldn't help the sharp laugh at Steve's ridiculous question. Of course, Steve would move in that direction. Heroes and villains. The good, the bad. He shook his head and then leaned into Steve's hand. It felt good to have Steve's fingers in his hair. No matter what he told himself, or Steve, for that matter, he enjoyed being touched. Granted,

it had been years and years since he allowed this level of intimacy.

As Steve pressed closer, Billy was tempted to lean against the shower wall. He knew better with his back, though. His gaze swept over Steve again, an amused smile beginning to curl his lips. Steve had a way with words, and it always startled him, or sent him off kilter, or just threw him on his damned ass. Like now, with the dark side and ruling the galaxy.

“You are an incredible nerd,” Billy reached out, nonetheless, and slid his hands over Steve’s chest, his sides, and then let them rest on his hips. He wouldn’t admit to Steve that he had seen that movie dozens of times, had enjoyed it, knew shit he probably shouldn’t (but hell, Steve had watched him converse about D&D with the kids, so...). “Of course, I want to be that for you. But you said *rest* and I’m pretty sure I’m going to stick to that.” Now, Billy was teasing, using Steve’s own words against him.

Steve kissed him then, gently, as he nodded and smiled at Billy. “The little shits are a terrible influence.” Of course he had seen it well before hanging out with the kids, but he had to preserve some of his dignity in front of Billy. Steve was quiet as Billy touched his body, smooth and unmarred, until the pads of Billy’s fingers pressed at his hips. “And I mean it, gotta keep you safe and locked in your tower, princess.” Steve’s voice dropped, and he said it seriously, attempting an impersonation of Billy.

He reached over and turned off the shower, led Billy out because Steve couldn’t have him slip on the floor. He would have to clean his injuries, use some gauze, and then maybe forcefully drag Billy into bed with some food. Billy would heal quickly from his physical injuries of the day, since most of it looked like a bad tumble on the ground, but he would probably never forget what happened to him.

“I don’t know about the princess part,” Billy mused as he stepped out of the shower. He opened up the linen closet and grabbed a couple of towels. “Not really pretty enough for that role. That’s why you, Steve Harrington, are the princess. I’m more like the dragon that guards the castle,” he shrugged, “Or, you know, imprisons the princess forever or some shit. Isn’t that how the story goes?”

Billy didn't actually know about those stories. He'd heard them before, but he had (guiltily) been more interested in Star Wars and other horror flicks. He carefully dried his hair out and then began to run the towel over his arms, chest, and stomach, drying off the droplets of water. His eyes weren't on Steve anymore, following his own hands as he did his best to dry off his body without agitating any of the injuries.

"My body is a mess," Billy admitted casually and then sighed, tipping his head back to look at the ceiling. "I'm fucking lucky I heal so fast."

"Mmm, I don't know, still looks good to me." Steve gently kissed the back of Billy's shoulder and then back of his neck softly. "This is probably going sting a bit, so just tell me if you need me to stop a moment." Steve dipped a cotton ball in some bactine and turned Billy to face the vanity.

Billy could see Steve over his shoulder, his brow furrowed as he bit his lip and tenderly cleaned Billy's back, his touch as soft as possible, because this shit was not soft. It was slow, methodical, cleaned well in order to take care of every wound on his back before Steve was able to reach for some salve. That was easier to apply but he would have to make sure Billy slept on his stomach or side for at least a day or two, until it started to scab over.

"You would say that," Billy mused and then tensed. He knew this was going to sting, but he figured it was minimal compared to what Neil has done. Still, it didn't lessen the sting of the alcohol on his back. He held his breath, though, his eyes trailing to Steve in the mirror. He watched him quietly, letting himself fall into *Steve* instead of whatever was happening with his back.

It was easy to do, really. Steve was nice to watch, to think about, especially considering what was going on. He reached back after a moment and squeezed Steve's arm, even if it was a bit awkward, before letting his arm drop down to his side again.

"I think maybe when it's more healed, we can use some aloe vera..." Steve mused, a little more to himself than to Billy. Most of the scrapes were along his lower back, and once the salve was on, Steve gingerly placed some large bandages over some of the worse areas.

He reached for the gauze and loosely wrapped it around Billy, his hand brushing along the blonde's stomach to reach for the roll as he went around his waist.

Billy's shoulder was really bruised, and even though the chances were unlikely, given how Billy was still moving it just fine to the naked eye, Steve tenderly presses his fingers there and murmured to Billy. "Can you, like, roll it back for me? I just wanna feel if anything might be wrong."

Billy glanced down, watching Steve's hands move as they wrapped the gauze around his waist. It looked strange against his stomach and reminded him of the last time he had a hospital run with Neil. He pursed his lips but kept quiet, his arms raised to make the process easier on Steve. When he was done, he let his arms drop.

Then, that asshole pushed his fingers against the bruise and he hissed. It didn't help that those guys had nearly taken his arm out of their socket. They really hadn't needed to do that to keep Billy down (actually, they had. Who was Billy kidding?). He frowned and glanced up into the mirror again to look at Steve. Slowly, because it was *painful*, Billy eased his shoulder back in a roll. He had been doing it earlier to relax the muscles, or to try to keep them from locking up, but he guessed Steve knew more than he did about the injuries.

"How's it feel, doc?" Billy teased, although his voice was strained.

Steve ignored Billy's tone and cocked his head to the side, before he chewed on his lower lip in concentration. "Hm, I can't feel any clicking or anything wrong, but it's still going to be sore as fuck for a bit. Maybe I can kinda put it in a sling if it gets worse." He doubted Billy would let him take him to the hospital, absent any evidence that it was far worse than it appeared to be.

"I'm going to have to make sure you don't roll on your back for a little bit. A lot of pressure on it wouldn't be good." Steve felt Billy's gaze on him and looked up, smiled at him in mirror. "What? Does that sound okay?"

"No slings. It'll be fine. Neil has done worse than that before," Billy

shook his head and then paused, glancing up enough to catch Steve's eyes in the mirror. "I'm starting to think I'm going to be spending a lot of time in your bed on my stomach, Steve." He tried to sound serious, sly, but he ended up laughing because it sounded fucking *stupid*, even coming from him.

"Shit. Anyway. I--think I need sleep, but Max'll need picked up soon. Fuck. Do you think... she'll be pissed if you get her for me? I know Hopper will be here tonight to take her..." And didn't that make his stomach clench? Sure, she was with someone trustworthy, but she was still leaving, and Max was all Billy had left when it came to family, and they were *step* siblings.

"Yeah, of course, I'll just tell her you weren't really feeling well." It wasn't like Steve could really tell her the truth. "You know I'm gonna make you take a pain pill like, for sure now, right? And that's fine with me. Your butt will be in the air." Steve playfully kissed along the back of Billy's neck, smiling and laughing softly, before he grabbed his ass once.

"Cmon blondie, lemme show you to your sleeping chamber." He gingerly put his hands on Billy's shoulders and marched him towards Steve's bedroom. Steve already knew with some rest, he would feel much better and be back to riling Steve up.

"I don't think I'd object to medicine-- *Harrington*," Billy laughed, thrown off by Steve's comment (whether it was the one about his ass in the air or the sleeping chamber or *both*, Billy wasn't sure), but did as he was told and walked out of the bathroom. Granted, he couldn't go against Steve, not right now, not with his hands on his shoulders and his gentle pushing.

"You've got a mouth on you," Billy mused when they were finally in the room. He had to admit, though, that the bed looked fucking fantastic and he was all for getting some sleep. He turned and pressed a small kiss to Steve's lips before easing down onto the bed. He didn't lie back, though, watching Steve. "So, medicine and rest, yeah?"

"I'm pretty sure you like my mouth, Hargrove." Steve grinned at him as he watched Billy slowly ease himself down on the bed. "Just settle and I'll grab it." Steve turned and hurried downstairs to grab some

medicine and juice. He probably should try to get some food in him and after some deliberation, he hastily made Billy another ham and cheese sandwich. If he ate the first one, he would eat another.

Steve shoved the pills in his pocket as he carefully made his way upstairs with the plate and a cup. This day had taken a really big turn. And he still didn't know then how much he was being watched, how much any of them were being watched. Steve sat at the edge of the bed. "You haven't had anything since breakfast, so you need something."

Billy looked up as Steve walked in and raised an eyebrow at the sandwich. He considered calling Steve a babysitter, but then thought better of it. He hadn't taken that so well before. Without argument, Billy reached out and took the plate. He settled it into his lap and glanced at Steve. "Thanks, man." He murmured. He picked up the sandwich, and although he wasn't hungry, he began to eat it.

As soon as he took a bite, though, Billy realized he *was* hungry. It just hadn't occurred to him through all of the bullshit that was going on. He ate quietly, his gaze on the wall, obviously lost in his own thoughts. They weren't bad, necessarily, and at some point, he had stopped thinking at all, too tired to actually put forth the effort.

When he was done eating, Billy set the plate to the side and opened his palm out to Steve, obviously asking for the pills.

Steve wordlessly pressed them into his hand with a smile and watched as Billy took them. Steve leaned back into his bed with a soft sigh, scooted against the headboard. He would pick up Max, they would have dinner, and then he would take her to Hopper's. She would have questions about Billy though, he wouldn't just willingly not pick her up. But he didn't want to give her nightmares or anything.

Steve closed his eyes, suddenly feeling a little exhausted himself, they would figure it out. He just needed to take a moment to get his head together so he wasn't outright lying to her. Making sure everybody was safe...that was the only thing that mattered. The Upside-Down would have to wait.

Billy took the pills willingly and watched as Steve moved back against the headboard. He set his juice down and crawled next to him. Granted, he didn't lie on his back. That'd be a dumb thing to do. Instead, he settled on his stomach and instead of putting his head on a pillow or in his arms, he settled in Steve's lap, his cheek resting comfortably against one of his thighs. He tucked an arm around Steve's waist while the other rest on the pillow.

"You have an alarm clock. You could set it and wake us up before Max needs a ride," Billy squeezed Steve's waist, as if encouraging him to do exactly that. It would be nice to nap against Steve, even if he couldn't do much other than lie on his stomach. "What d'you say, pretty boy? Nap and then you can rescue Max?" He grinned and tilted his head so he could look up at Steve.

Steve laughed softly, "I guess I'll take you up on your tempting offer." Steve turned and set his alarm, it would be short, but even just a few minutes to relax were extremely welcome. Steve then carefully slid down in the bed, tried not to jostle Billy really hard as he did.

He watched Billy situate himself back against Steve and Steve looked hard over his face. Steve was going to have to fucking lock him up at this rate. Steve kissed Billy softly, could already feel the blonde growing lax against him. "Can I ask you something? Did you ever..." It was just some things Billy had mentioned, "Did you ever think about me? Before this I mean but like...you know."

Billy wondered if Steve knew to ask these questions after he was medicated. He shifted so he was lying basically on Steve's chest. He wasn't on his back, so that was a plus, right? Billy tilted his head so he could look up at Steve from his position on his chest. His eyes focused, and it seemed to be difficult because the pain medication was working and it felt *good*.

"Mm... The party," Billy admitted, "The Halloween one. You were damn fine in that suit and those glasses, Harrington." He chuckled and pressed his lips to Steve's collarbone. It was just an affectionate gesture. "I felt like... *shit* after what happened at the Byers' house. Did I tell you that?" Billy couldn't remember. Too much had been said so far. "I wasn't even punching *you* ... and then, shit, I was thinking... punched out the only hot guy in Hawkins. Great job,

Hargrove. You definitely got a chance now.”

Steve arched an eyebrow, “Really??” He was sure Billy hated him that night, the way that the blonde glared at him. “I was sure you wanted to deck me right there,” Steve laughed softly. “And sometimes in class you just...I thought you were just waiting to kick my ass, the way you looked at me.” Steve could feel Billy boring his eyes in the back of his head, occasionally he glanced back and caught Billy looking.

And Steve knew now the night at the Byers had nothing to do with him, he surmised after a run in with Neil just exactly how Billy felt. Steve flushed a little at the only hot guy remark but managed not to argue with Billy this time. “You never would have won without that plate, Hargrove, you play dirty....I guess you couldn’t just talk to me, huh?”

“Always playing dirty.” Billy chuckled and pressed his cheek against Steve’s chest. He closed his eyes and listened to his heart beat for a few moments, strong and sure below his ear. “The last guy...” He scoffed and opened his eyes again to stare at the wall. “I was *sure* my dad was going to kill me the last time he saw me with a guy. Granted, I was gonna kiss him, not just talk to him. But da-Neil-god. I had to have my arm set. Did you know,” Billy tilted his head and grinned. “That some of my teeth aren’t real? Permanent, but not real.”

Billy shrugged and was glad that it didn’t cause pain “I didn’t want to risk it. If he could find me in Cali with a boy? Here, in little ol’ Hawkins? He’d find me, and that was a risk I didn’t want to take.” He hesitated. “Then, shit, I beat your face in and... I wasn’t sure how to--talk to you--which is where the drinking came in, I guess? Easier to talk to me when I’m drunk.” Or on medication, apparently.

“I don’t know if it’s easier for you, I was really sure you were going to try to kick my ass when we first met. You just like came *at me* —“ Steve laughed. “It was kinda intimidating and you were, Jesus you were half naked.” Steve laughed again, harder this time. “And then the next time I saw you were half naked and then actually naked in the shower! You’re always somewhat naked, Billy.”

Steve gently stroked Billy's hair and smiled down at him before he froze a little in thought, "Oh, you called me pretty boy then...Jesus, Hargrove." His smiled fondly at him, remembered that moment, though at the time he was incredibly confused.

"M'body is all I have going for me," Billy mused. "At least, normally. When Neil got a hold of me, I usually didn't show up to school until the worst of the bruising was gone. But I worked my ass off for this, you know. I'm gonna show it off." He huffed and was mildly tempted to explore the ticklish spots he had found earlier. He knew it was a terrible idea, that he would need to wait until later, when he was healed and could handle keeping Steve down.

"Plenty of bitches in the sea, Harrington," Billy recalled, his lips curling up in a stupid, goofy smile. "How the hell did you end up with this one, exactly? I'm gonna have to thank Nancy at some point for being a dumb--" and then he remembered that Steve did *not* like it when he spoke negatively about her and snorted, "girl. A dumb girl. See? I can do this."

Steve gave him a hard look and then reached out and gently flicked Billy's nose. "You already kinda know, asshole. I asked her out because I was trying to get into her pants and I just...felt differently about her. It just became something different, for me anyway. I just wanted to be...a better person. But even since last Christmas, it was just...well, it just got tainted. I didn't talk to her about anything I thought and she just missed Barbara and it all seemed...really fake. That Halloween party she said...she said I was bullshit, that we were bullshit, and she didn't love me. And that was just it. And now you know." Steve concluded softly, but with no malice in his voice.

He truly felt that Nancy was right, she was a smart person and just saw it before him, that was all. "She was always gonna end up with Byers, even early on I felt it. Just like how with you, I just—" Steve stopped himself and flushed a little, suddenly aware of Billy's gaze on him again as he looked down at him.

Billy raised an eyebrow at Steve. Honestly, he had actually been talking about Steve choosing him--the fucked up kid with daddy issues. Except, he was okay that Steve went on about Nancy. He wasn't with her anymore, and after the last couple of days, Billy

didn't feel the need to be worried about a rekindling between the two. Besides, she seemed pretty set on Byers the last time he saw them at school.

"I'm so glad she was able to make a man out of you," Billy drawled and swept his hand over Steve's side. He drug his fingers over him lightly, not necessarily tickling but the teasing was definitely there. "Although, Harrington, I don't think you're bullshit..." He hesitated and then realized he had said almost the same thing before. That *this* was bullshit. Not that Harrington was, but what was happening, and now Steve's reaction made sense.

"Oh, shit, Steve," Billy blinked, focusing again on Steve's face. "This--fuck. I didn't mean, when I had said--" he squeezed Steve's side. "You're not bullshit to me. You know that, right? I mean, I'm shit at this *talking* thing normally, but... Like, Max's choice in pizza is bullshit, *this* isn't."

Steve gave a little squeak and glared, but quickly swatted at Billy's hand. When Billy became serious, Steve took him in and smiled warmly at Billy's discomfort. He waved his hand a little, "I know, it was just...I know. That night she said that I...I don't know, after everything with the Upside-Down, she was the one thing that was okay, but I felt like I fucked that up. And when you...I just really didn't want to fuck up with you too."

Steve gently raked his hands through Billy's hair, his fingertips lightly dragged over his scalp. "I just always know what I feel, that's a weird..like a weird gift?" Steve didn't want to articulate sexual electricity to Billy, he would never hear the end of it. "I just couldn't tell you because...it wasn't fair to put you in a position to have to know this shit, deal with with shit. And I feel like that's my..." Steve trailed off for a moment and cleared his throat, even if all this stopped after the first night and Steve was still miserable, given the chance, Steve would make that choice to keep Billy safe.

Billy watched and listened, although he had about a thousand words on his tongue. He was also beginning to slip, though, his eyelids fluttered despite his effort to stay awake. He blamed the drugs, of course, and not the fact that he was exhausted, anyway. He opened his eyes to focus on Steve again and tilted his head. The urge to sleep

wasn't helped by Steve's fingers, either, as they carded through his hair and moved along his scalp.

"None of this is your fault," Billy sighed, "Steve, listen, okay? None of it. You can't keep holding onto that shit. I know now, I'm involved, and we just have to... keep going, I guess? If we keep regretting shit or looking back... We might miss something in the present, you know?" Billy felt like he was high. He was high and none of the shit he just said made sense.

Steve stopped and smiled down at Billy, the blonde's eyes barely open as he chuckled softly. "You know Hargrove, I can tell you're a lot smarter than you let on. You should stop doing that, because it's kinda hot, like really hot." Steve caressed Billy's face gently, his thumb smoothing an eyebrow.

"Part of me is happy you know..." Steve whispered. "Because I know I wouldn't have just told you, I would have...just let you break it off, honestly, if that's how you stayed safe and away from me. I just...that night in the locker room, I just thought about how I never fucking hung out with a guy before since it all happened, like my own age and just...stopped thinking about that shit. But when you saw me...I just thought you would know I was some kinda freak." Steve swallowed and laid a little further down on the bed. "They were just getting so much worse and more...vivid." Steve concluded, trying not to think of them then.

Billy blinked and watched Steve, his gaze lingering on suspicion. "I get straight As, you know. Almost all AP classes. 3.8 GPA," he huffed and slid his lips over Steve's chest, simply touching. He closed his eyes and tucked himself against Steve's body, literally tangled himself as much as physically possible without becoming a leech.

While Billy's eyes were closed, he was listening. "I was a freak long before I met you, Harrington, so... we can just be freaks together, yeah?" He pressed his cheek into Steve's chest, as if he was fucking *nuzzling* him like some damned cat, and sighed against his skin. "And you know you can wake me up if you're having issues. I mean, you woke me up that one time. I was fine. I don't mind." He would never mind. He had to learn a faster way to pull Steve out of his nightmares, but he'd figure that out when they happened.

“Besides... drunk you is *really fucking funny* . We gotta do that again.” Billy didn’t realize he was skipping around topics at this point, his body beginning to relax as sleep began to pull at him.

Steve was really surprised by Billy’s admission, mostly because it really wasn’t obvious unless one took a good look at Billy. But that was...really high. And Steve really did find it hot. It wasn’t as if Steve thought he was stupid, no matter what his father constantly said or implied, it was that Steve naturally took to some things and stumbled through others. Whatever Steve took to, it was easy to excel at and he enjoyed doing it. But everything else, if he didn’t have an apt for it, Steve just avoided it. It was hard to fail at something if you never did it in the first place and it was a hell of a lot easier to deal with his father’s outright dismissal than his disappointment.

He appreciated Billy again, for just...accepting that ugly part of himself, taking care of and tending to it. It was something Steve hadn’t learned to do. Steve smiled and gently massaged Billy’s head and scalp, slow with his fingers barely touching Billy’s skin. “Guess your intel was kinda wrong on drunk me, huh? I can hold it okay, but staying sober isn’t the same. Personally, I think you just wanna get me naked in bed again, Hargrove.”

“You’re naked now, so I’m halfway there,” Billy chuckled and squeezed Steve’s side. He ran his thumb back and forth over his skin and it seemed to be something he was doing without realizing it. He liked touching--constant contact was something that helped keep Billy calm, and wasn’t that a bitch? After so long of being on his own, Steve Harrington trots in and turns his entire world upside down.

“I think I’m gonna fall asleep here in a minute,” the warning was soft, uncharacteristic of Billy. It was hard to stay awake, though, as the medication took over his injuries and his brain. “Steve...?”

Steve was about to speak to Billy, tell him it was fine and what he wanted, before he heard his name. It was strange to hear Billy like that and he couldn’t help quirkling up an eyebrow, “Yeah, what is it, babe?” Steve gently asked, mirroring Billy’s tone and nickname that Billy probably wouldn’t remember.

The blonde was heavy against him, really heavy, but Steve didn’t

really mind it. The fact that Billy was safe and with him, the weight as proof, felt damn good to Steve. Both of his hands were on Billy, one hand in his hair and the other stroking his upper arm.

Billy smiled against Steve's skin and didn't bother shifting, or looking up at Steve as he spoke. He may be medicated, but he knew better and didn't want to see Steve's face. He closed his eyes and sighed against Steve before he spoke, his words beginning to slur with the beginnings of sleep.

"I *really* , *really* like you," he finally mumbled. His stroking of Steve's side began to stop as he fell asleep, his breath even and deep. It still bothered him that he wouldn't be picking up Max, but Steve had been right--he was fucking *exhausted* and needed to rest.

Steve sighed softly, "Me too, asshole." Steve kissed his head gently before he settled in the bed to nap. Steve felt like by the time he finally closed his eyes, that stupid alarm was already beeping. He jerked quickly and groaned before he hit it off. Definitely not enough sleep. Steve laid there for several minutes, Billy snoring lightly on top of him, before he slowly eased out from under him.

Billy just had a way of trouble finding him...Steve leaned down and pulled the blankets over him. He looked over his prone form, watched Billy sleep before he knew he had to move and got up. He quickly pulled up his jeans and tugged on a sweater. Max would understand, she at least knew he was injured and needed rest. Steve kissed his head before he hurried down the stairs, not wanting to be late.

He wouldn't talk to her about what happened. It was too much for a little girl. It was too much for him. He could bring her back to the house, make dinner, although maybe he should make Billy stay in bed. Steve had to take the Camaro, and he wasn't sure how Billy felt about that. When Steve started the car and felt the purr of the engine, he let his fingers dance over the steering wheel. It felt really different from the Beamer, felt so much like Billy, and Steve was going to make sure he drove this car as fast as fucking possible. Steve checked the mirror and moved the seat up before he buckled himself in. When he finally peeled out of the driveway to head over to the junior high, Steve honestly didn't know how he fit into Billy's lap in this damn

car...

18. Chapter 18

Summary for the Chapter:

This chapter begins one month later, the boys are starting to settle in a routine and are coping, before the rug is ripped out from underneath them with a ton of angsty plot. Relish the smut and fluff while you can, it's gonna get rough.

Dedicating the smut to the lovely Janna, that deviant.

It had been almost a month since Billy's run in with Neil and those assholes. He had healed up for the most part, but exhaustion dragged at him with its claws. Staying at Steve's meant he had met his parents, and although they didn't give a fuck if Billy stayed, they also didn't seem to give a fuck if Steve was alive or not. That chewed at him because Steve was an amazing person. Hell, he drove kids around, babysat, and took care of a house on his own. How could they not be proud of him?

But they weren't, and sometimes, Billy could hear Steve's dad droning at him about college and after school and how he was *wasting his life* . Billy had grit his teeth and walked away. He didn't mention it to Steve; he didn't want to make things worse. Yet, the realization dawned on him that Steve was having nightmares before he came along, which means he was screaming and having panic attacks while his *parents were home* .

That was painfully clear when Billy blinked his eyes open in the guest bedroom, drowsy but aware of the scuffling, hitched breaths, and tiny noises coming from Steve's room. He pushed himself up and furrowed his brows. Steve's parents were home, explaining why Billy was in the guest bedroom, but they weren't up. He kicked the blankets off and got up to walk into the hallway.

When he did, he noticed that the parents' light were still off. His lips twisted into a scowl because *fuck them* . Steve had been alone, dealing with this shit, and they just slept on? If they woke up, did

they even care to actually *check* on him?

Billy doubted it.

Quietly, he walked passed the bedroom and eased the door open to Steve's. He slid it shut, not minding that it was dark, and didn't hesitate. He never did. It didn't matter if Steve got a punch in or freaked out. He never kept himself from him. He walked forward, the room memorized in his head, and kneeled on the bed.

"Hey, baby," Billy murmured, knowing those noises, the frantic breaths, the shaking. "Hey, can I come closer?" He always started with questions first. It helped make Steve realize who he was, and sometimes it was enough to bring him out.

Steve was sitting up, his knees drawn up to his chest and his elbows rested on his thighs. His hands were half tangled in his hair and holding onto the bat, which wobbled precariously in his grip. There was a little fresh blood on it, as Steve grabbed it from the top. It's not like he cared, Steve wasn't even awake enough to care.

The nightmares had been bad, really bad, and they were clearly taking a toll on Steve. Billy had seen the first that night they drank together, but they ebbed with Billy beside him. If he had a nightmare, Steve was able to jerk himself awake, not often by screaming or crying out, and sure, it woke Billy, but they were both able to quickly go back to bed.

Then Steve's parents came home and were apparently going to be home often for this holiday season. His mother would cook some small dinners and his father made small talk about work, but otherwise, the Harringtons didn't really interact with each other. It had been more polite at first, everyone more *aware* of Billy, until that facade dropped. Then Mr. Harrington's hints about Steve's lack of diligence were more clearly insults. If Steve had a good grade or did well on the team, it wasn't addressed. Ever. But a poor grade or some sort of failure was discussed at length and in *excruciating* detail. If only Steve could apply himself, maybe he could actually succeed, his father quipped, but his mother would chime in school just wasn't Steve's forte. And his father would hum and agree.

Steve never discussed it with Billy, usually just helplessly shrugged and gave him a little “what are you gonna do?” embarrassed smile. The only time it seemed to get to Steve was the one time his father had called Steve an idiot during a moment when he was clearly frustrated with Steve’s non-responsive stare back at his father.

“Why are *we* working so hard to give you all these things if you can’t even take advantage of it? What is even the *point*, Steven? You need to stop acting like a child and a damn idiot.” Steve’s mother didn’t disagree. It wasn’t loud, they didn’t scream or hit Steve. It was just clearly what they thought of him. Steve’s jaw worked and he quietly excused himself, asked Billy to join him. It was the first time his presence was acknowledged that evening. Steve drove silently to the quarry and just sat in the Beamer for several minutes. Eerily silent before he pounded on the horn several times in frustration and tears. When Billy tried to grab him, he wrenched from his grasp, got out of his car, and used his keys to scratch along the entire body before he slid back into his seat, only then able to calm down.

It was a damn Christmas miracle that they would leave soon for Switzerland. They felt that Steve had school, and *he* would need to remain home, but that didn’t mean they needed to change their plans. It was almost disturbing how little Steve cared he would be alone for Christmas.

Steve muttered under his breath, tugged harder on his hair, really hard, as his fingernails scratched slowly along the grip of the bat.

Billy sighed shakily and knew this was going to be one of those that took a minute. He edged over to Steve and eyed the bat. As much as he wouldn’t mind Steve lashing out, he did *not* need any more holes in his body. He slid his hand forward, brushing across Steve’s fingers that gripped the bat before circling over the wood. He gripped it gently and eased forward until his knees were touching Steve’s.

“Steve, baby,” Billy cooed and moved his fingers on the bat so that half of them covered Steve’s while the other half stayed on the wood. “Come back to me. It’s Billy. Baby...?” He reached up with his other hand and brushed the backs of his fingers over his cheek and then eased it up into his hair. He stroked his fingers over the fingers that were clenched into his hair. “Let go of your hair for me, Steve. Come

back to me, please...”

Billy hated this. He hated having to see Steve hurt and be scared. He didn't deserve this and he didn't deserve his shit parents. He leaned and pressed his lips to Steve's cheek. He had noticed the blood on Steve's hand, had known he had grabbed the wrong part of the bat, and all he wanted to do was cradle the guy in his fucking arms.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been, Steve didn't fight him tonight. Steve always joked how Billy fought dirty, how he could hold his own. And while it was extremely unlikely he could beat Billy in a true fight, when Steve was just crazed with panic and fear, he could fucking give Billy a run for his money. Steve could be fast, really fast, when he was taut and ready to attack. Being bigger than Steve had its advantages then, if he managed to pin Steve, it was basically over. It was just a challenge to get to that point.

Steve's grip loosened on the bat and his breathing slowly evened out, but he didn't move his hands out of his hair and didn't look up at Billy. His voice was thick and the house was so stifling, “I wanna make another.”

“You have six, baby,” Billy murmured. He slid his fingers underneath Steve's on the bat, slowly easing them away with gentle nudges. He brought his hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Six well made bats will be just fine, yeah? You don't need anymore than that. You can only use one at a time.” He brought Steve's hand forward and opened his palm up. He tilted his head so Steve's palm slid over his own cheek. He kissed his wrist and then reached down to take the bat and slid it to the floor.

At the same time, the hand in Steve's hair stroked along his scalp. “Let go of your hair. No hairspray will be able to fix it if you pull it out.” He smiled against Steve's wrist and kissed the skin again. “Come on. If you let go, I can get your hands on me. You know I love that.” Despite the fact that they had barely done anything since Billy had healed. His parents had been around too much, and Steve had been fucking *exhausted* from these nightmares. Billy often stayed up late, holding him, so he was tired, too, but he didn't feel like he could complain.

“I want another.” Steve’s tone was a little nasty, a little petulant. It had nothing to do with how many he could use at a time. They could be in different locations. Access was important. More nails. Maybe something on the nails, he could look up some shit like that. Who the fuck knows, maybe it could work.

The nightmares happened basically every night, and if they didn’t happen, Steve *waited* for them, and was actually pissed when they *didn’t* occur. No matter what, he just couldn’t fucking *sleep*. Steve slowly released his hair, there was a little blood on his scalp and in his hair, but the wounds weren’t deep and he hadn’t fully grabbed the bat.

He had to remind himself not to pick a fight with Billy, Steve was on edge and could feel this sick urge, just a little push and Billy would scream at him. A tiny shove and Hargrove would really fucking hit him. It was strange and sick and somehow the only thing Steve wanted, as opposed to Billy Hargrove gently kissing him night after night while he just couldn’t keep his fucking shit together. He wasn’t even doing anything with Billy, couldn’t even fucking give him anything in return, and that was painful too. It felt unfair to Billy, and it didn’t matter how irrational it was—it was how he felt.

Steve quickly pulled his hand away and laid down on the bed, turned and faced away from Billy. He clenched his fists once, dug his nails into the meat of his palm, and fuck it felt good to feel something. It grounded him just like Billy’s kisses and words, and this was something he didn’t have to rely on Billy for.

“...I’m sorry.”

Billy hesitated and then dropped his hands into his lap when Steve laid down and turned his back to him. He swallowed and clenched his jaw. He wished he could help more. He wished he could do *something* instead of just talk. He chewed at the inside of his cheek and looked over the other teenager. His stomach coiled and he let his shoulders sag. He wouldn’t admit that his eyes felt wet, even though they had been together for a while now. At least it was dark in the room.

Despite the pain thundering in his chest, Billy slid down behind Steve

and tucked an arm around his waist. "We'll get another one tomorrow, okay?" Billy murmured, giving in. He always gave in. "I'll... go to the hardware store, get some nails, and we can make another one. However many you want." He tucked his chest against Steve's back and ignored the way his mind screamed at him to do something, anything, to make Steve smile again.

But right now, all Billy could do was hold Steve and wait for him to fall asleep. This is all he could do, and he hated that. He moved his other hand to Steve's hair and gently stroked through it. He would have to help Steve take care of the blood in the morning.

Steve sharply inhaled for a moment but he didn't turn his head, didn't face Billy even as his own eyes fucking hurt from the lack of sleep and they watered over. He grabbed at Billy's hand desperately, even as he said, "You don't have to do this. You shouldn't have to do this for me, Billy."

He would let Billy do whatever he wanted with his body if Steve thought it wouldn't be the one time his parents would actually check on him. It felt more than fair really, maybe not loving or what he wanted, but the only thing he could give Billy.

"We can't be the only two queers in Hawkins." It wasn't the first time Steve had suggested something like this, gave Billy a out. It would hurt Steve, really fucking hurt him, but he would gladly take Billy back and draining Billy like this was hurting him too. "I wouldn't...if you did—"

Billy tightened his hold on Steve's waist and felt that familiar rage boiling in him. The idea that Steve thought he was better off-with *anyone* --made him want to retch and scream at the same time. He closed his eyes as he tried to stamp out the anger, his breathing starting to become a little choppy. Fuck, this wasn't okay. This wasn't *okay* .

"Stop, Steve," Billy finally managed, "I'm not leaving you for anything or anyone. I don't care if everyone was suddenly queer. I'm not *leaving* you. Stop telling me to do that." The statements dug doubt into Billy's brain, thoughts along the lines of maybe Steve didn't *want* him . He knew that wasn't right, though. It couldn't be right.

“Just... calm down, baby. Just sleep, yeah? That’s what you need,” Billy kissed his shoulder, ignoring the slip of tears down his own skin. They were out of frustration more than anything else joined with the paranoia that Steve may not want him.

“I’m here, and I’m staying.”

Steve swallowed hard and searched along the wall, the white cast of the lights faint in the room, as he heard the hitch in Billy’s voice. “I’m—I’m sorry—“ His eyes stung from the strain before he abruptly turned to face Billy.

The words tumbled freely from his lips, “I don’t know how to make things right for you, okay for you. And I just..!” Steve let out a soft sob, fuck he hated that, hated not keeping his shit together. He brought up his fists to his face, pressing them into his eyes. “I fucking *hate* it when they’re here, I fucking hate this house like I’m a fucking cryptkeeper, I fucking hate how they fucking HATE me!” Steve screamed the last part before he broke off with a sob, he knew they wouldn’t come out to his room. His mother was dead asleep, he knew she took something for it and it was something Steve considered sneaking, but knew Billy would get incredibly upset with him. His father...sometimes Steve thought that if he was dead, the biggest concern his father would have was how many accomplishments he could put in his son’s obituary.

It was the first time Steve actually said anything negatively about his parents. It wasn’t that it wasn’t obvious, it clearly was the longer Billy was there. But Steve just dealt with it. He didn’t even say anything that night he keyed his car up, and when he returned, his parents hadn’t either.

Billy flinched as Steve apologized and then froze as he turned over. He reached up and wiped his own cheek off quickly, trying to hide the fact that he had been crying, too. He swallowed and gathered Steve into his arms. Both arms tucked around Steve, pulling him into his chest, even as he screamed. He let out a harsh breath against Steve’s neck and squeezed his eyes shut.

“I get it, I get it,” Billy murmured, and he *did* . God, did he get it. He kept one arm locked around Steve, keeping him against his body as

the other moved to gently tug Steve's wrists down so he could look at his face. "Hey, baby. I don't... I don't hate you. I know it's not... it's not a consolation, but we have each other, right? That's gotta count for something?" Billy hoped it did. He really fucking hoped. He pressed his lips over Steve's cheek, peppering them along until he laid a gentle kiss over his eyelid, then his brow.

"Steve, listen to me, okay?" Billy's voice was hushed, quiet, because he couldn't afford Steve's dad finding them like this. "After we graduate, we'll get jobs. We'll get an apartment together and you won't have to see them anymore, right?" He pressed a kiss to the tip of Steve's nose and then to his lips.

Steve kissed him back with a feverish desperation they hadn't been able to experience since his parents' return. He whimpered into his mouth and god he wanted that, wanted Billy always in his bed, always like this. Steve pulled Billy halfway on top of him, clutched at him like he finally could since Billy was basically healed. Steve knew what he wanted to say, what he *really* wanted to say, but instead he just nodded quickly, too unsure if Billy or he was ready for that.

"I want that, I want that with you Billy, just...I'm so fucking sorry. One more week and they're gone and I'll be...one more week." Steve kissed all over his face. "You can have your first Christmas here and we can...we can have it together, right?"

Billy hissed as Steve kissed him with much more passion than he had intended. His lips parted and he gasped against Steve's mouth. It had been a while since they had touched like this, explored anything beyond small touches and knowing grins. Having Steve's parents there had kept them well away from each other, and Billy had hated it. He was just as desperate as Steve--he simply tortured himself by holding himself back.

Which is why Billy felt heat pool into his stomach as Steve pulled him almost on top of his body. He rested a leg in between Steve's and one hand pressed into the bed next to his head. The other touched his cheek, stroking along the skin until he pushed his messy hair out of his face. It was then that Steve started to kiss his face and he tried not to smile (and failed miserably).

“One more week, Steve,” Billy reassured and held Steve’s jaw a bit more firmly so he could push him back to look over his face. “We’ll have Christmas together. Then New Years, and then Valentines, and whatever holiday after that. You’re stuck with me, Harrington.” He leaned down, easing most of his weight on his hand as he pressed his lips over Steve’s. He immediately parted his lips to slide his tongue over Steve’s lower lip, his ‘his parents are in the other room’ thoughts fumbling out the window.

Steve moaned softly into his mouth before he kissed Billy harder. He arched his hips and threw one leg up, hooked it over Billy’s ass to pull the blonde down against him. And as soon as Billy was down, he began to rock against him, panting softly, desperate for more. God, he fucking wanted Billy. Sometimes all he thought about was Billy fucking him or him fucking Billy, and being apart from him was physically painful, every time he was with Billy everything was just better, his whole fucking life was just better with Billy in it.

Steve gently raked his nails over Billy’s stomach and his chest as he bit Billy’s lower lip. “I *need* to do something for you, please--let me suck you off...” Billy had been caring for him for damn near a month now. A month of gentle kisses and caresses to soothe Steve back to sleep. It was wearing on Billy, even if he wasn’t going to say anything to Steve. It wasn’t that Steve just wanted to do something to him, it was a fucking burning need to watch Billy’s expression of pleasure, to watch him explode until he could relax, too. “It’ll even keep me quiet, Billy, let me--!!” It was Steve’s first time acknowledging his tendency to be loud when they were together and it was embarrassingly clear it was something Steve thought about ahead of time.

It wasn’t that Billy had any issues with this. It was that Steve’s parents were in the damned house and he was legitimately worried about what they’d do to Steve if they found out that they were together. He grunted as Steve’s leg curled around his ass and pulled him forward. He was only wearing sweatpants, so Steve’s erection was really fucking apparent against him. It didn’t help his own, though, when Steve reached out and drug his nails over his stomach and chest. His muscles rippled in response, clenching, and he gasped against Steve’s mouth.

Billy cursed under his breath, his skin beginning to burn at the idea of Steve's mouth around him. He hated that it was so easy to convince him, that Steve's voice and his pleading shifted Billy's resolve so damned easily. It wasn't fair, really. Steve could probably pull anything out of Billy and he wouldn't give a damn.

"You might be loud, Harrington, but I can be pretty quiet," Billy tried to sit back, tried to get his damned head on straight. He trusted Steve. Hell, they had been doing this for well over a month, and the fact that they hadn't been able to touch, to do anything? It had driven Billy half insane. He was naturally a physical person. That was how he *showed* his affection.

Billy leaned forward, finally, and pressed a kiss below Steve's ear. It was clear he wanted physicality between them, but he also needed to feel in control, and for once, Billy *didn't* want to feel that way. He was fucking *drained* at this point.

"Y'wanna fuck me, Steve?" Billy implored, glancing over Steve's face to watch for a reaction--for anything. They both needed some sort of release, or *relief*, and it wasn't going to just be Billy. He was slowly trying to work Steve out of the taking-care-of-everyone-else-but-him shit.

Steve blinked in shock and briefly stopped his attack on Billy, "I—yes, yeah I do..." Steve whispered then and gave a little nod as he swallowed hard. He met Billy's intense gaze and sobered up for a minute there from his panicked desperation and his heart was pounding in his chest. Truthfully he thought about have sex with Billy in virtually every position, he also thought about all those promises Billy made to fuck him too. It was fucking confusing and delicious, all at the same time, and Steve wanted all of it.

"I wanna do everything with you Billy..." Steve swallowed again and dragged his fingers down Billy's body, softer this time and more reverent. "But if I...I can't be quiet with you, I just...but I *want* to—" Steve sat up a little further, kissing Billy again and arching under him. "That's why if I...I can still be quiet...Please, let me do this for you." Steve slid a hand under the waistband of Billy's sweats and gripped him, palmed him slowly.

Billy chuckled, then, and shook his head. "You need to learn to be quiet, Steve," he mused and returned the needy kiss, allowing himself to melt into it. He dipped his tongue passed Steve's lips and explored him, *teased* him, before Steve grabbed him. His whole body tensed and his breath stuttered into Steve's mouth. It had been a long fucking time since they had done anything, and he wasn't even sure how long he would last. Sure, he had spent nights to himself, but that wasn't anywhere close to what Steve does to him.

"Yeah. Yeah, we can do that," Billy's voice was hoarse now, rough with need. He was talking against Steve's lips and his hips rolled forward, pushing his cock through Steve's hand. "Hold on, let me..." He shifted back on the bed and eased Steve's hand away. Billy didn't move far, though, moving so that he was sitting against the headboard. He reached out and tugged Steve to him again, catching his lips as he did.

Billy was going to do the same for Steve. He would, and he would gag the idiot if he had to. For now, though, he would let Steve explore.

Steve watched Billy maneuver around easily in his bed, the blonde was finally recovered and had his usual grace. It was something Steve admired about him, this sleek and effortless beauty he didn't possess himself.

Steve allowed himself to be tugged and melted his body over Billy's, limp, and it made him shudder to feel the hard planes of Billy's body. He tried to be mindful before, careful even when Billy pushed him for more. But Billy's body was precious to Steve and he wasn't about to treat it so carelessly as others.

Now he pressed his hand hard against Billy's stomach, felt his muscles clench as he slid his hand up to Billy's neck and cradled his head at the base of his skull. Steve kissed him deeply, sucking his lower lip and hand before it became too much for just a second, he pulled away with a gasp, their heads still touching. "I can't, you know...be quiet I mean." Steve swallowed and looked into Billy's eyes. "I used to be quieter, not—all of that is for you, that's what you do to me, I can't stop. And...I don't want to."

Steve tore his gaze away from the blonde, before he said something else, and planted hot, open mouthed kisses down his body. He took one of Billy's nipples in his mouth and sucked there, biting gently as he worked down to Billy's sweatpants.

Billy raised an eyebrow, curious as to what Steve was going on about. He couldn't imagine Steve being quiet, not with their encounters. Steve was always breathy and loud and beautiful. The idea that he used to be quiet? That was just *sad*. He snorted and shook his head before Steve kissed him, and he returned it just as passionately, opening his mouth and dipping his tongue against Steve's.

When Steve pulled away, he tipped his head back against the wall and shivered. "You being quiet sounds like an injustice," he mumbled and then hissed as Steve's teeth and mouth found his nipple. He squirmed for a second against the wall and held his breath. Honestly, the guy was just as attentive in bed as he was outside of it.

Billy glanced down, watching Steve's mouth move down his chest, his stomach, and he rolled his lower lip between his teeth. They hadn't done anything since he had healed up, and Steve had been careful with him. Billy didn't need that, though. Not now. He raked his fingers through Steve's hair but was careful of the little wounds he had caused earlier. He stroked the brown locks gently before smiling down at Steve.

"You're gorgeous, y'know?" Billy mumbled.

Steve glanced up and flushed a moment, let out a small, breathless laugh of embarrassment. "Shut up..." Steve quietly moaned as he sucked on Billy's left hip bone, nipped at the skin there as he reached for Billy with his hand and worked him slowly, stroked him and licked his lips when he glanced up at Billy.

"I don't want you to ask, I *want* you to come in my mouth, okay?" Steve moved his hand slowly, his face still flushed but determined. He had thought about what he wanted to do for Billy for awhile. Steve breathed over him slowly before he took Billy's cock in his mouth. He started slow, because he was really trying to take more. Steve hadn't done this much yet, but he wanted to pleasure Billy, wanted him to experience the same things Billy made Steve

experience.

He let go of Billy's cock, one hand on his hip and the other on his stomach, Steve's fingers pressing hard there again. Billy could have left him at any time, Steve wouldn't have blamed him, hell, he even encouraged it. But Billy stayed for him. Steve's brow furrowed in concentration and he moaned thickly on Billy's cock, it was much quieter like Steve had said, even though Billy could *feel* it.

Billy's blood ran hot when Steve told him to come in his mouth. His breath hitched and he watched as Steve pushed his hand against his stomach again, keeping him still as his lips replaced his fingers. It was a fucking sight--his messy hair, his brown eyes with ridiculous thick lashes, the way his cheeks hollowed out as he sucked. Billy thought it was *perfect*.

And then Steve moaned. Billy's hips twitched, almost giving into rolling forward as his hands began to card through his hair. He dropped his head back and almost closed his eyes. He managed to keep them somewhat open, trained on Steve's face as he continued to suck on him, to pull him into that wet heat.

"Shit," His voice was breathless and he hated how he sounded. "Steve, it's been--forever--I don't think I can..."

Steve gave a very tiny shake of his head and lightly dragged his nails over Billy's stomach, he really didn't care. Steve just wanted to feel him, feel Billy arch off the bed and come in his mouth. He wasn't going to take no for an answer and they both waited long enough.

Steve bobbed his head slowly, it was difficult to take more of the length in his mouth and every time he wanted to gag he squeezed Billy's hip hard. His eyes were wet and he didn't care, just as long as Billy was enjoying the warmth of his mouth. He opened his eyes and looked up at Billy intently. When he saw Billy was already staring at him, he moaned loudly, just thinking about Billy watching him do this, studying Steve like he had so many times before.

Steve blinked away a few stray tears and increased the intensity. He pressed himself to take another inch, his mouth salivated around Billy's length and he hummed for just a moment, flicked his gaze

back up to Billy.

Billy hadn't seen Steve like this--not wrecked with tears on his face or saliva on his lips. He looked fucking *hot* and Billy struggled with his breathing, struggled with being fucking *quiet* for once. God Dammit, Steve. He clenched his teeth and grunted. He didn't want to admit it, but he dreamed about this. He dreamed about his cock in Steve's throat and the guy crying over it being pushed in too far. He ached when he woke up and then been pissed that Steve's parents were there.

Now, Steve had his cock as far down as he could get it, and Billy was breathing raggedly. He dropped his hand from Steve's hair to his lips. Slowly, he stroked his thumb over Steve's stretched lips, and then, without warning, he pressed his thumb alongside his lip, stretching them further, and slicked it over Steve's saliva. He sucked in a tiny breath and curled his hips forward, grunting as he came.

Unfortunately for Steve, Billy kept his thumb there, basically forcing Steve to swallow his cum *and* to become dirty with it, to have it drip over his lips. Billy continued to hiss as he came, his eyes trained on Steve and his stomach muscles spasming under Steve's fingers.

Steve winced for just a moment when Billy started to come before he swallowed thickly around his cock. Somehow it always surprised him, even when Steve felt those movements quicken. He flushed darkly, wondering what Billy was seeing when he looked at Steve like that, and then made it fucking filthy. Steve could feel some of Billy's come and his saliva drip down his chin and he flushed even more. He groaned loudly, right over Billy's sensitive cock and felt him shudder under him.

Steve pulled away slowly with an obscene, wet pop, his jaw and mouth aching. Steve kept his gaze on Billy as he made sure to lick his lips in front of the blonde. He could tell Billy it was for him, for a show, and while that was true—it was only partially true, because it was for Steve too. When Steve saw Billy's expression, his body relaxed on the bed, it was all worth it.

Billy could *feel* Steve swallowing around him and he shuddered, clenching his jaw shut to refrain from making any noise. It came out

as a muffled grunt, and he slouched against the headboard, letting his lips fall slack so he could pant. His eyes were half-lidded as he watched Steve pull back, watched his cum and his spit drip down his chin, and he wanted more. He wished he could pin Steve down and fuck him, show him what he could *really* do, but with the parents there, he couldn't.

"Fuck, Steve," Billy reached out and took Steve's jaw in his and. He swiped his thumb over his chin, gathering some of the spit and cum, and then slid the digit in between Steve's lips. He pressed his thumb onto his tongue and shuddered. "Damn it." He was going to get hard again at this point. He didn't feel bad about it, though, not with how debauched Steve looked.

"When your parents are gone, Steve," Billy breathed, pushing himself forward so he could lick a trail of his own cum from Steve's lips. "I'm going to fuck you so hard the whole fucking neighborhood will know."

Steve was still flushed and he laughed softly as just how awestruck Billy sounded. Steve played along though and closed his mouth around the finger, sucked incredibly hard then, harder than his mouth had been on Billy moments ago.

Steve gazed back up at Billy as he did it, his tongue playfully flicking over the thumb. He let it go after softly biting it, only to meet Billy's mouth. Steve let out a surprised groan as Billy kissed and cleaned him up. He caught Billy's lips and circled his tongue with the blonde's. Steve knew it was more than just banter. It wasn't just a sexy joke, Steve was sure Billy would try it as soon as he could.

"I want that, too..." Steve pulled back and licked his lips again, felt a little off centered and dizzy from the heat pooled inside him. "I want you more than anything..." And Steve hoped Billy could tell he was sincere.

Billy hesitated at first and then settled back against the headboard. He tilted his head and watched Steve closely, his eyes flickering over his body. "You sure you can't handle being quiet, pretty boy? Long enough for me to return the favor?" He grinned. "Or I could just jerk you off? Put my hand over your mouth, muffle those noises you

make?" Not that he wanted to. He *liked* listening to Steve.

"Let me do something, yeah? I can try to keep you quiet," Billy would have to no matter what with Steve's parents down the hallway. He shifted and offered his hand out, waiting for Steve to decide what he wanted. It was clear, though, that Steve would have to choose something. Billy wasn't going to just let this be.

Steve licked his lips again, God he wanted Billy so badly, he just knew himself well enough to know what the last thing he could handle was screaming and his parents barging in. He didn't know how they would react to him being with Billy, not just liking a man. Foremost was that Billy needed security and a place to stay. And that was more important to Steve than Billy returning any favors.

He also thought about the last time he pulled away after pleasuring Billy, how upset the blonde had been and he found himself nodding slowly. "I just...I have to stay quiet and I..." Steve laughed a little and whispered, "You make me loud and it's really fucking embarrassing... I've never..." Steve swallowed again, Billy was a lot of firsts for him.

"I'll keep my hand on you. You can even bite me," Billy grinned and then hooked an arm around his waist. Being healed meant he could pull Steve around, and he enjoyed that fact. Without trouble, he pulled Steve over so he was forced to straddle Billy's waist. He reached down and wrapped his fingers around Steve's cock, squeezing the base and then stroking to the tip. At the same time, he reached up and clamped a hand over Steve's mouth. His thumb and index finger dug into Steve's jaw. It was enough to slightly pinch, but not so much hurt--only enough to keep his hand in place.

As Billy began to stroke Steve, he leaned forward and captured one of his nipples with his mouth. He ran his tongue over the nub before biting gently. As he did, he swiped his thumb over the precum gathering at Steve's tip and rubbed it across his skin.

Steve moaned out loudly immediately under his hand and his eyes fluttered closed. Even if he wouldn't say it, it was clear Steve needed this just as much. Billy watched Steve wound up for a month now. Between the nightmares and his parents, Steve was at a breaking point.

Steve arched his hips and there was a muffled curse under Billy's hand as he shuddered in excitement. He hadn't even been touching himself lately when they were in separate rooms, it was depressing as fuck but been that energy was gone and he would drift off and jerk wide awake from a nightmare looming over his head. Steve only found some solace with Billy around and while he felt a little sad and pathetic of his dependence on the blonde, it also wasn't going away any time soon.

His cheeks were fucking hot, really fucking hot when he grabbed Billy's hand for a moment and stilled his efforts. Steve wasn't really sure he could say it, directly ask for it right now in his muddled brain. His own hands shook for a moment when he swallowed nervously and gently pushed Billy's hand below his cock and closer to his ass, and he was cherry red when he pressed Billy's fingers between his ass cheeks, knowing he would get it.

Billy paused and looked up, assessing Steve's face. When he was sure that this is what he wanted, he shuddered and had to fucking breathe to keep himself from rolling over and pinning Steve down. He pulled his hand away, but only for a moment, to slide his fingers into his own mouth. He drenched his fingers in as much spit as he could, his other hand still clamped on Steve's mouth.

After Billy was satisfied with how wet his fingers were, he circled his arm around Steve's hip and pressed his fingers along the crevice of his ass. He slid his forefinger against that tight ring first, his eyes steady on Steve's face as he massaged the tight ring. Slowly, he eased just that finger in, pushing in bit by bit, knuckle by knuckle.

At this point, Billy really hoped Steve could contain his noises. He curled his finger and then pushed it deeper. He wanted to pull his hand away from Steve's mouth to jerk him off, but he knew better.

Steve breathed heavily through his nose, his eyes a little glazed over as he watched Billy suck his fingers. He looked so amazing like that...Steve arched his hips up for Billy to help him. It felt awkward, not really pleasant at all, but he remembered how much Billy enjoyed this, being touched like this. And when Billy had put his tongue back there, it had felt amazing to Steve so if nothing else, he trusted Billy.

Steve's eyes fluttered closed for a moment and he focused on the sensations. It wasn't exactly like he wanted, but Billy was inside him, and he really wanted that above everything else—to be as close to Billy as possible. It was a strange and dangerous desire that consumed Steve more times than he would ever willingly admit. Steve slowly writhed on top of him, his hips rising and falling ever so slowly and slightly on Billy's finger.

"Shit," Billy breathed as he watched Steve literally fuck himself on his finger. He bit his lower lip and wondered when he became the one who needed to be quiet. With a small huff, he slid the second finger in next to the first. The muscles were tight and Billy could feel his cock filling again as his eyes took in Steve's body, his hips, the way he shivered and moved. Of course, this would happen on a night when Steve's parents were home. He grit his teeth and began to ease his fingers in and out of Steve's body, pushing them in deeper before curling.

Billy knew what he was looking for. He had felt it when Steve's fingers had moved inside of him, and he wanted to see that same look of shock and pleasure on Steve. He spread his fingers gently at first and then began to ease them out. Slowly, he curled them back in, moving one knuckle at a time as he searched the tightness of his walls.

Steve's hips moved slowly, his thighs flexing as he tried to get used to the sensations and slowly became excited again. It was just so different from what he was used to, especially when Billy touched some part inside him that made his eyes roll into his back of his head and he bit down hard on Billy's hand to muffle a scream—he hadn't even realized he'd done that for a moment.

Is that what Billy felt before? Could he do that again, do that when he was fucking Steve? His breathing quickened, and Steve keened out, low and still somehow too loud under Billy's hand, arched his hips to feel that again.

Billy winced when Steve bit his hand, but he had told him to, and part of him *liked* that Steve was willing to bite him. He hissed out and then paused. "Hey, baby... Suck on my fingers, yeah? Just like you did to me earlier." He grinned at him and pushed his index and

middle finger into his mouth. At the same time, he curled and pushed his fingers up into that spot again, rubbing his fingers over it unapologetically.

Part of him hoped that Steve sucked so he didn't make a noise. He pushed his fingers along his tongue as he fucked him with his other hand. His eyes never left Steve, as if watching him was enough to actually get him off. Which, at this point, fucking sucked because he was hard again.

Steve whimpered as Billy pushed his fingers inside his mouth and pressed along his tongue, it made him pant like an animal as one of his hands clawed at the sheets, yanking it up and twisting it in pleasure as he sucked on Billy's fingers wetly. It felt fucking undignified and what was worse was that he didn't want Billy to pull away.

He circled his tongue around them and reached one hand up and pushed Billy's fingers further into his mouth. It made him lightly gag, but since they weren't as thick or big as Billy's cock, he was able to take them rather well. His hips moved of their own accord, helped Billy find that location as Steve felt hazy, like he was floating. It was easy for him to get lost in the sensations with Billy. Easier than anything else in his life. It was like this rush of water that rushed over him, and Steve was willing to drown in it.

His head lolled for a moment and he felt that Billy was hard again just under Steve, even though he never said anything. All the nightmares, his parents, his future all of it was gone. They would get an apartment. Holidays. Billy was stuck with him. Fuck, Steve didn't want anything else *but* Billy Hargrove.

Steve pulled Billy's fingers out with a wet gasp and rolled off Billy's waist and onto the bed. He bowed his body forward with his legs tucked under him, his knees spread far apart. His body was pliant and still available for Billy at his side, Steve didn't want him to stop what he was doing—Steve just felt him again, *wanted him again*. His hands pushed Billy's thighs further apart and he squeezed them tightly when he took Billy back in his mouth again, far like he took his fingers.

Billy almost groaned at the way Steve sucked on his fingers. He was still moving his fingers inside of him, but when Steve suddenly moved, changing his position and forcing Billy's fingers out of him, he fought the urge to put the boy underneath him and simply fuck him, his parents be damned. He froze, though, and hissed as Steve's mouth circled around his cock and then swallowed down.

Shit. Billy's stomach muscles tightened, his thighs spreading easily for Steve as he went to work on Billy's cock. The skin was sensitive and so was Billy after his orgasm, and it made him twitch and hiss. Knowing he didn't want to stop being inside of Steve helped Billy collect whatever thoughts he had left.

The fingers that had been in Steve's mouth curled into his hair, instead. He rocked his hips up and sucked in a sharp breath at how *hot* Steve's mouth was, and before he could get too distracted, he leaned over and slid his fingers against Steve's hole again before pushing in both fingers at once. He knew it would be a stretch, it might burn a little, but he doubted Steve would care.

Steve's brow knitted as he sucked on the blonde, squeezing his legs as he moaned around him, but as both fingers were back inside him, his back arched up at once and he let out a helpless, moaning whine around Billy. Billy's cock slipped from his mouth once and for a brief moment Steve's head dropped and rested against Billy's stomach as he breathed raggedly over his skin, the sound filling up the entire room.

Steve's body started to shake and it took tremendous effort, but Steve knew what was coming and so he lifted his head back up and took Billy's cock back in his mouth with renewed urgency. When Billy found his prostate again though, his hands scrambled over Billy's thighs, squeezed hard and he dug his nails into small crescent marks along his thighs. Steve managed to groan a curse over Billy's cock, own thighs shaking even harder as he chased his own orgasm and rocked his hips.

It was a strange realization for Billy that he could cum just watching Steve writhe on his fingers. The noises, even muffled against his cock, were sinful and absolutely gut-wrenching. He had hissed as Steve's mouth left him, and his muscles continued to quiver under Steve's

breath. His fingers moved again, pushing into that spot that caused Steve to dig his nails into his thighs (and Billy might have a thing for that stinging pain, because *damn*).

Billy spread his thighs a little wider, giving Steve more room to roam his hands, his nails and rocked his hips up to stifle another one of Steve's moans as his lips returned to his cock. He continued to push his fingers into Steve's prostate, massaging and sometimes simply brushing. His eyes lidded half-way, his lips parted as he watched and *felt* . He pushed his hips forward again and grunted.

His own release was steadily climbing. He could feel it coil against his spine, ready to burst again.

Steve jerked hard once and screamed out around Billy's cock when he finally found his release from Billy's fingers milking him. It was decidedly good luck that Steve had moved to suck Billy off, because the blonde's fingers wouldn't have muffled the noise that came from within him, primal and needy, with a few tears leaking from his eyes as he came so hard, Steve could have sworn he actually saw stars.

Ropes of come shot across the bed, Billy's side, and stomach as his mouth opened further, and he didn't gag as he unintentionally took Billy much further into his mouth. His body spasmed with the force and his fingers pressed so hard against Billy's thighs that it would form small bruises later. Steve had never come so hard in his life and he felt like he was barely there, dizzy with pleasure, and barely conscious of Billy thrusting into his mouth.

Billy made sure to dig his fingers into Steve's prostate repeatedly as he came, knowing how fucking *good* it felt to be pushed over the edge and then tortured while actually coming. He managed to stifle his own groan as Steve came over his side and stomach. The warm ropes of cum made his body clench and his head dropped back as Steve's fingers bit into his thighs.

The pressure there is what did Billy in. He was used to pain--quite a bit of it--but this kind of pain was different. He liked feeling how desperate Steve was against his thighs, liked that there were definitely going to be bruises later. Instead of coming down Steve's throat again, he tangled his fingers further into his hair and tugged

his mouth off his cock. He removed his fingers from Steve's ass and he began to stroke himself quickly, harsh, targeted movements that pushed him off his own ledge.

His orgasm left him hissing and Billy probably should have felt bad for painting Steve's face with his cum. But he looked *good* like that--flushed and fucking pretty.

Steve trembled violently following his orgasm and he felt Billy hold his head up as he gasped and panted harshly, his mouth half open. He managed to close his eyes as he felt Billy's cum hit his face. Steve knew he should be pissed off, but after his orgasm, he honestly didn't care. If anything, it stirred something a little dangerous inside him that Billy was marking him, even if it was just cum.

Some of Billy's cum had hit his tongue and lips, and he licked his lips more on instinct than anything else, but even with his eyes closed, he knew Billy was watching him. That stirred something within him too, he knew that Billy liked watching him like this. Billy was a visual creature, physically affectionate, and Steve didn't mind showing him he appreciated that way as well.

His breath was ragged and he couldn't stop shaking as he fell back on the bed bonelessly. Steve opened his eyes slowly and raised a trembling hand half up, he watched himself shake for several moments, unable to stop himself. Steve laughed softly in fascination, "Holy fucking shit..."

Billy's hand dropped away from his cock and his grip in Steve's hair lightened. He stroked across his scalp and swallowed. Damn, Steve looked good like this. At the other's cursing, though, he tipped his head back and choked on his attempt to muffle his laughter. He bit his lower lip and tilted his head to the side so that he could look at Steve through half-lidded eyes.

"You look good like that," Billy grinned--the same wolfish grin he had on the basketball court and the showers. It had been quite some time since he felt like this, and part of him wished he could stay in Steve's room for the rest of the night. The idea of his parents looking in after they woke up, though? That wasn't a good idea. He sighed and sat up a bit straighter.

“Feel better, babe?” He reached out with his clean hand and brushed the back of his fingers over Steve’s cheek.

Steve laughed again, felt Billy press close to him again, as he used his forearm to wipe at his face. “You fucking pervert,” Steve said, with no malice in his voice, only amusement. He groaned softly and couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face as he melted back into the bed, the sheets deliciously warm and welcoming under him.

He turned his head a little to look over at Billy and couldn’t stop himself from laughing again, he felt fucking *giddy*. “Yeah, I feel fucking amazing...” And Steve looked it too, more relaxed and happy than Billy had seen since his parents arrived. “That was just...wow.” Steve didn’t even know why he was talking since it wasn’t like he was actually thinking about what he was saying.

Steve made a small explosion noise and his eyes dropped closed again for a moment when he smiled and hummed in pleasure.

Billy laughed and then clasped a hand over his own mouth. His eyes glittered, though, as he looked down at Steve and let himself calm down enough so that he could breathe. He slumped against the headboard and shook his head. Christ, the things this guy did to him. His lips quirked as he shifted his legs.

“I’d like a shower. Do you think your folks would notice if we went to the first floor bathroom?” The same place that Steve had cut his hair in and had patched him up. He had avoided it until now, but he needed to get clean, and so did Steve. Besides, they hadn’t showered together since those assholes came back. It didn’t even feel like *their* house at this point. They were more like guests that talked down to Steve (the dad more than the mom).

“No, let’s do it. It’s not like I can go to first period like this, right?” Steve grinned despite himself, felt it drying on his skin and it started to feel a little gross now, even if his amusement didn’t dim. Steve sat up and swung his legs over the side, they would need to be careful, but his parents were typically quite regular about when they woke up, his father precisely at 6 A.M., and his mother shortly thereafter to make his breakfast.

"You better clean my face, all this is yours anyway." Steve stood a little quickly and his legs briefly gave out under him, sending him back onto the bed as he barked out a laugh of surprise. "I got it, I got it." He stood slower then and looked back at Billy, "Ta-da-!" Steve felt stupid and silly, more so that he was when his parents were first gone, but it almost felt like he was making up for lost time, felt more relief than he had in a long time, even predating his parents' return.

"How do you even manage yourself on the court?" Billy rolled his eyes as Steve tripped over himself. He found it exceptionally amusing, and it felt *good* to see Steve like this again. It had been a while. Too long. Billy slowly got up from the bed and made a damned show of looking Steve over. "What can I say, Harrington? I like making a mess of you."

Then, just to fuck with Steve's head, Billy leaned up and drug his tongue along Steve's cheek, gathering some of his cum. He licked his lips as he leaned back and then grabbed the sweats he had been in when he walked in. He was chuckling again as he pulled them on, amused beyond belief at this point.

This is what Billy had missed. His parents sucked the life out of Steve, and Billy hated them for it. Once they graduated, Billy was getting a damned job and he was moving him the fuck out of this house.

Steve made a face and grimaced, but he laughed as well. "Ugh, you're fucking gross, dude. You're just jealous I'm so much smoother than you." Steve just yanked up a pair of shorts off the floor, unaware he put on his basketball shorts and grinned. He gestured down to them and then back to Billy. "See? Not even intentional—it all just flows together when you're this amazing."

It was difficult to go down the stairs together, Billy was quiet for the most part as Steve kept poking and prodding him with a grin on his face, teased Billy with every step they took. He laughed when they finally made it to the bathroom and after everything Billy managed to put him through, his constant struggle to maintain an upper hand, either physically or mentally, Steve really liked flustering the guy.

Billy had managed to keep his noises and scoffs to himself as they ambled down the stairs, ignoring Steve's comment about being

intentional and amazing. Granted, Steve *was* amazing, and as soon as they were in the bathroom, Billy shut and locked the door. He crowded Steve against the counter, planting his hands next to his hips and leaning, full body, against Steve's taller form.

"You *are* amazing, Steve Harrington," Billy murmured. "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, yeah?" He pressed a light kiss over Steve's lips before stepping back. Looking away from Steve, because he wasn't sure he wanted to see whatever expression was there, he shucked his pants off and leaned over to start the shower.

Steve grinned widely, fully expecting Billy to tease him as his ass pressed against the sink, but when Billy spoke, his smile faded. Shit, the asshole got the upper hand again, anyway. He swallowed a little as Billy stripped and started the shower before Steve grabbed the blonde and abruptly spun him around and kissed Billy deeply, sucking his lower lip for a moment.

He pulled back slowly and caught Billy's gaze, his voice a little thick as he mimicked Billy, "You too, Hargrove, yeah?" Steve kissed him softly again before he cleared his throat, the air a little different between them for a moment. "No funny business, the last thing I need is Nancy asking me questions."

Steve was sure she had plenty already. He told her that Billy was staying with him, working through some shit, and left it at that for now. Steve knew he was allowed to tell her he was with Billy, and he didn't mind if she knew, it was just more initiating the conversation. The look of shock on her face the first time he urged Billy over to them at lunch had been more than enough to make him want to delay the conversation.

Jonathan was never really all that comfortable around him, occasionally chiming into the conversation, but Billy and Jonathan often were just there while Steve and Nancy conversed about random bullshit. It wasn't anything beyond friendship, and it seemed like Jonathan knew that, it was just that sometimes Steve missed her companionship, hated holding back just a little from anything that could be construed in a bad light. She was often worried about how Jonathan took their friendship, their ease, and Steve could tell. Hell, he was sure he might have done the same with Billy, even if it wasn't

readily apparent the reason why he did so.

Steve tested the water temperature and when it was adequately warm enough, he stepped inside.

Billy stumbled a bit when he was yanked around and kissed. He blinked, staring into Steve's eyes as he replied, as he included Billy in that, too. His eyes flickered to the side and his lips moved into a thin line. It was still hard for him to accept certain things--like being important, or having any meaning or value. Those things still struck a weird cord in his head, and sometimes, Neil's voice would follow--laughing or mocking him. It was why Billy tried his best to simply stay away from deep conversations. He could do touch--touching was easy, and he could show how he felt through holding Steve or kissing his temple. Words were shit, in his book, but he knew Steve liked them.

"I think Nancy knows, anyway," Billy began, glad for the change of topic. "She keeps giving you these weird looks. Either that, or Byers knows. That kid is quiet, but he's observant as shit. I bet he has shit on every single person in that damned school." He shrugged and watched Steve step into the shower. He crossed his arms over his chest, staying where he was for just a second.

Then, Billy stepped into the shower, behind Steve. "Not sure how long you can keep this a secret from them, pretty boy."

Steve stepped under the spray for a moment, felt the hot water hit his face and he closed his eyes before he quickly combed through his hair. Once he was at least a little rinsed off, he stepped to the side to share with Billy. Steve turned and blinked at him, "It's not like...you're a secret. I just don't know what to say to her. Like, 'Hey Nance, remember when you called me bullshit? Yeah, well, now I got a boyfriend, so I guess you're right as fucking always.'" Steve wasn't really thinking when he called Billy his boyfriend, and he certainly didn't think about it after, as it just rolled casually off his tongue.

He closed his eyes again, squinted and tilted his head back a little as he washed his face again. He left all his products upstairs and would have to settle for whatever was down here. "Might calm down Byers though, I guess, and he'll stop looking at me like I'm gonna hit

him and kiss Nancy, or something.”

Billy worked his jaw as Steve recalled Nancy calling him bullshit. That seemed like a running thing with him. What she said to Steve that night stuck with him, and part of Billy wanted to deck her for doing that. Of course, he had said some really shitty things, too, so perhaps he couldn't talk. He didn't move into the spray when Steve offered it, instead leaning against the wall so he could watch him.

“How does having a boyfriend make you bullshit, Steve?” Billy was curious. He wanted to know what that meant. “I get the whole Barb thing as bullshit, but what does that have to do with a relationship?” He crossed his arms over his chest again, tightening them so that his shoulder blades dug into the shower wall.

Steve opened his eyes and looked back over at Billy, blinked in surprise as he felt the water clinging to his eyelashes. He noted Billy's change in temperament and posture and he wondered what Billy was thinking. Steve frowned a little in concentration and forced himself to think back to that night, the night of the party. It wasn't something he did often, he had felt so fucking crushed at the time, but it didn't have the same sting anymore.

“I just mean...I don't know, I just think that part of it was like...” Steve sighed and tried to articulate what he wanted to say really carefully. “Like our *feelings* for each other was bullshit too. And it's kinda true, right? I mean she loves Jonathan and I--” Steve cleared his throat for a minute and prayed that Billy just fucking let this go, it was not the fucking time. “I have you, too, right? We just weren't meant to be or something, so, bullshit.” Steve quickly snatched some conditioner and squirted some in his hand before he shoved the bottle in Billy's direction.

Billy furrowed his brows as he listened to Steve and then took the bottle as it was shoved into his hands. He watched him quietly for a couple of minutes, sorting out his own thoughts. He had been doing better at not jumping to conclusions, not wanting to tear something up at the slightest provocation. He had told Steve before that he wanted to get better, and Steve didn't want him to end up like Neil. It was just weird for him not to jump immediately on top of what Steve was saying.

"I don't think the feelings were bullshit," Billy shrugged his shoulders. "I mean, you all stayed together for a while. And there was something there. It just didn't work. Sometimes, I guess relationships don't." He slid the bottle through his hand, dropping it onto the other. "I also... don't believe in that 'meant to be' bullshit, Steve. Nothing is ever meant to be. I don't... think like that. I used to, a long time ago. But shit happens." He dropped his gaze and then shrugged again. Hell, despite wearing his mother's necklace, he didn't believe in any sort of deity.

What kind of god, male or female, would let children suffer? Would let people like Neil live? Billy called *that* bullshit, and that "meant to be" garbage lied heavily in religion.

Steve watched Billy intently as he spoke and his chest painfully constricted. He thought back to when Billy talked about the odds that Steve came into his life, got him out of Neil's house and into his own bed. Like it was a gamble. Maybe it was a gamble to Billy, his whole life a series of chances and bad rolls of the dice. But it wasn't that way to Steve. No matter what happened, if they stayed together or not, Billy Hargrove changed his life forever. Meant to be was just the easiest way for Steve to articulate it, but he firmly believed it.

Being with Nancy didn't just happen on its own. Her not being just another conquest didn't just happen. The Upside-Down didn't just happen. Dustin being at the Wheelers didn't just happen. And Billy Hargrove, battered under the spray of the locker room showers, didn't just happen.

Steve's voice was a little thick, "Yeah, you're probably right." He closed his eyes tightly and ran his fingers through his hair again, scrubbed the conditioner hard into his scalp, relished the distraction.

Steve cleared his throat again, "I'm taking Dustin to the dance tonight, the Snowball? So I'll be home late. You're taking Max, right? When she's done with Susan?"

Billy frowned and he knew he had fucked something up. He wasn't sure how, though, and he held the conditioner bottle tightly in his hand. He worked his jaw and then chewed on his inner cheek again. To Billy, fate wasn't a thing. His mom died when he was far too

young. His dad had beaten him enough to knock his teeth out and to hospitalize him *before* he met Steve. The guy had a huge heart, and he was incredibly protective. At least, the person that Billy knew. He had heard rumors about the person Steve *had* been, which didn't match now.

Still, Billy couldn't place the shift in the shower. He wasn't sure how what he said was harmful, but he knew he couldn't just leave it like this. If he did, and Steve continued to let it fester, it would end up in something bigger. Like the fucking "bullshit" comment.

"Steve...? What did I say?" Billy pushed himself from the shower wall and stepped up to Steve. "I--yeah, I'm taking Max, but... what did I say that upset you?"

Steve did his best not to sigh and opened his eyes, peering up at him. He smiled at Billy and wrapped his arms around Billy's waist. "You didn't say anything, blondie." Steve kissed him softly and pressed his body a little closer. Visitation for Susan and Max had just started, and even though Neil would be gone for the evening, Billy would still be back in that house, Neil would still be in the air all around him. Steve didn't need to bring up this shit now.

"I can meet you in the parking lot or something, I promised to show Dustin how to style his hair." Steve squeezed around his waist softly and pressed his forehead against Billy's. Honestly, this was enough, more than enough. He had demanded so much of Billy and to expect more was unreasonable. Steve knew how he felt and what he wanted, and there was still holidays together, an apartment together, and together had to be enough.

Billy didn't want to push it. He didn't want to push it because he didn't want to upset Steve, and he wanted to trust him. So, he backed off, holding his tongue and nodding his head. He reached up and slid his fingers through Steve's wet hair. He stroked the locks back away from his face and offered him a tiny smile in return.

"Let's meet up, then, yeah? I'll try to avoid your parents. I still need to take Max to school and then to the house." The house--because it wasn't *home*. This was home. He pressed his lips to the corner of Steve's. "Don't go sharing all your secrets. He'll end up taking your

title in high school, you know. Then what're you gonna be known as? Someone who got overthrown by a damned nerd."

Steve laughed as he murmured against his lips, "Somebody has to inherit my throne..." Steve kissed him slowly, softly sucking his lower lip as Steve smiled. "Maybe we should stay out a little tonight...do something. That doesn't involve monsters or brats. Like...maybe a movie and dinner." Steve knew what he was doing, but Billy and he never had an actual proper date. It was strange to think they were together absent normal dating, but they had both been through so much, it was just unnecessary. Steve bit his lower lip as he smiled at him. "I promise to make it worth your while, Hargrove."

Billy returned the kiss but broke off to roll his eyes. "Honestly," he muttered, "I can't imagine Dustin getting anywhere near where you were, King Steve." He chuckled and then paused, his gaze intensifying as he looked at Steve. A crawl had gone over his skin and his jaw clenched for a second. "Steve... we can't--not like normal couples do. You realize that, right? Sure, we can go to a movie or dinner or whatever, but... we can't *act* like we're together. I can't hold your hand. I can't act like I care. You know that, right?"

The thought hurt him, and it was obvious with the way his eyes flickered to the side and his lips thinned. He would love to take Steve out, to act like the damned man he wanted to be, but public wasn't an option. Not as a couple, anyway. "I mean--I would love to, but we gotta... keep this under wraps, yeah?"

A part of him felt guilty that Steve couldn't have that with him like he did with Nancy. He may have felt like their relationship was bullshit, but it certainly didn't have to be hidden.

It wasn't like Steve hadn't realized that, but it surprised Steve, just how much emphasis Billy put on it. He smiled softly and ran his hand through Billy's hair. "I know that. Just... *I* know and that's all that matters, right?" He just wanted to be close to Billy, when they were alone, they could be themselves. But they could still do *activities* together, experience one another like that.

"Besides, I can hold your hand in a movie and nobody will know

anything different, Hargrove.” Steve took his hand then, intertwining their fingers. “So...let me take you on a fucking date.” Steve said, a little breathless but smiling as he kissed Billy again, gently, as he squeezed his hand. “Some...burgers and a terrible movie...” Steve kissed over his face before he grinning a little, “Maybe fool around in the backseat of my car...”

Billy had to fight the urge to shy away. Neil’s voice was in his head again and he felt like shit because of it. Steve didn’t deserve that. *They* didn’t deserve that. He finally forced himself to relax, though, even if his muscles randomly twitched with the arguing going on in his head. He sighed against Steve’s lips and returned the kiss. Instead of letting Steve move away, though, he cupped his cheeks (dropping the conditioner to the bottom of the tub), and pressed a little more roughly to Steve’s mouth. He dipped his tongue over Steve’s lower lip and then drug his teeth over the flesh.

When Billy felt satisfied with the kiss, he leaned back and brushed his thumb over Steve’s lower lip. “Sounds good, babe,” he murmured. “It’s a date, then. And your car is probably better for it, anyway. Bigger.” He grinned and gently pushed Steve away from the shower. “Now move, asshole. I need to actually wash off.”

Steve sighed softly into the kiss, still smiling until Billy pushed him aside and he gave a little huff of annoyance. It had to be close to the time his parents would get up anyway and he was clean. “Fine, fine, hurry up in case my Mom comes downstairs.” Steve kissed him quickly a final time and pulled the curtain aside. He had one leg out and after a moment, lightly smacked Billy’s ass. “Have a *great* shower, babe!”

Steve laughed and hurried out of the shower before Billy could do anything. He grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist and took the stairs quickly to avoid his parents. Steve made a beeline for his own bathroom in order to style his hair properly, but when he was inside, Steve quietly locked the door and glanced in the mirror. Everything that he wanted was downstairs, still in the shower.

Truthfully, the depth of his feelings frightened Steve. It all felt so fragile and confusing, and it was, wasn’t it? One minute he was in the throes of a nightmare and the next all he wanted was Billy pressed

against him. It would be easy if Steve was making a mistake. Hell, according to his father, he fucked up all the time. It was just no matter how much he thought about it, the more certain Steve felt about Billy, and certainly more so than anything else in his future.

That would be another conversation. Was it fair to ask Billy to stay in Hawkins? Did Steve even want to stay here? He wanted away from his parents, from his nightmares, but the thought of leaving the little shits alone and potentially defenseless made him feel ill. And what would Steve do in Hawkins? The idea of working for his father, *becoming* like his father--that would kill him. Steve swore softly, he waited too long to tend to his hair but he would just have to deal with a snide remark from Dustin and make due.

Jobs. An apartment. Together. That was going to be Steve's mantra for the foreseeable future.

19. Chapter 19

Summary for the Chapter:

A short, but crucial, chapter that deserved a stand alone.

Billy jerked a little bit as Steve smacked his ass and shot him a nasty look, despite the fact that he was fighting back a smile. His shower didn't take long, and neither did getting ready to pick Max up. The weirdest part about picking up Max, though, was the cabin. It was off in the middle of fucking nowhere. On top of that, a little girl with curly, brown hair answered the door. He had never seen her before, but he wasn't able to ask any questions. Not that he would (he may have wanted to). Max had come out of the cabin before he could and pulled him toward the car. He glanced over at the figure in the window and then looked forward. Strange kid.

He wanted the time to drag by because, believe it or not, he did not want to go to that fucking house. He didn't care if Neil wasn't there. Being there made his skin crawl and bile climb up his throat. Which, he grudgingly admitted, was why, at around seven pm that night, he was staring at the front door instead of going inside. The panic in his gut made him light headed. Neil wasn't even *there*, so there was absolutely no reason for him to feel like this. It was pathetic.

With a huff, Billy pushed his car door open and made his way into the house. He didn't bother knocking. When he got inside, he walked passed the bathroom to grab a drink from the fridge. On the way, his gaze flickered in and he paused for a moment, watching Susan gently comb through Max's hair. He found that he liked Max. He truly did, but in moments like these, he hated that he didn't have anyone like Susan around.

Granted, he didn't think Susan was all that great of a parent. Allowing her kid around Neil? Not a smart idea. He hesitated a moment longer at the door and then walked to the kitchen. He'd drink a beer if he felt comfortable enough driving, but he didn't want to get started. Instead, he grabbed a coke and headed back toward his car.

“Ten minutes, Max!” He called before slamming the door shut and stalking back to his car. No--he wasn’t going to stay in that house. Not any longer than he had to.

Max clearly wanted some time alone with Susan anyway. She glared at Billy the entire night, urged him elsewhere in order to be with her mother. The judge granted her visitation rights, with the stipulation that Neil be away when Max was there—at least for now. Hopper tried to explain to Billy that when it involved children, there wasn’t going to be just one hearing, so long as the parents gave a damn. And Susan and Neil did with *Max*, they wanted her back in their lives. It was going to be fight.

Hopper already started the emancipation process for Billy, though he was nearly 18 and there didn’t seem to be much of a point. Strangely, though, Neil refused to sign the paperwork, which was frustrating. Billy didn’t even care as much until Neil refused to grant him this one last thing. It wasn’t like Neil wanted him back in the house, they had no contact with each other. It was yet another power play, Neil’s final power play before he turned 18, a refusal to let Billy go without his explicit permission.

Of course, when Billy heard that Neil refused to sign the papers, he had been furious. Cussing, spitting mad. It had taken Steve a while to calm him down, but eventually, Billy just said ‘fuck it’ and stomped off. It wasn’t like he wasn’t going to be eighteen soon, anyway. He’d be able to make his own damned decisions. The only issue he saw with it was the idea that, at any point, someone from social services could just fucking grab him if they felt like it.

Billy sank lower into the driver’s seat of the Camaro. He popped the coke open and took a long swing of it. The carbonation felt good down his throat, but his stomach was still in knots about the idea of going on a date with Steve. He wished it could be more normal for them. He wished Steve didn’t have to fucking hide like he had his entire damned life. Part of him hated himself for doing this to Steve, but Billy was selfish, and he wanted the guy to himself. He frowned as he stared out of the windshield of the Camaro.

The date would go fine. It would be fine, right? Just dinner and the movies. It was normal things friends did together. Billy ground his

molars and set his coke down to tug a cigarette out of his pack. He flicked his lighter until it lit the end and breathed in. Maybe after they graduated, he could convince Steve to go to Cali with him--or any other big city who didn't give as much of a fuck about this shit as Hawkins, Indiana did.

Billy could actually take Steve places in California, let him be happy the way that he should be. That morning had been difficult, watching Steve turn from despondent to ecstatic. It couldn't be healthy for him, long term. Constant nightmares and panic attacks and the last thing Billy wanted to see was another fucking bat. But Steve lying next to him on the beach, being an idiot on a ride at Disneyland, freely eating at restaurants together and maybe even looking like a couple while doing it--that was a real possibility in California.

Max made things complicated. She wasn't going to leave her little nerdy friends and if Billy left with Steve for California, she would be back with Susan and Neil instantly. If he couldn't keep tabs on Max, she ran the risk of pissing Neil off, and based on Susan's past behavior, it was unclear if she would be safe. Maybe Neil would never hurt her. Maybe Neil would treat her exactly like he did Billy. It was impossible to tell what motivated Neil to hurt other people, other than disobedience. And if there was one thing Max was, it was disobedient. Billy worked hard to keep her in line before, for her own safety, but if he was gone?

The door opened and Max stepped outside. She looked really nice, her hair softly framed around her face with a clipped braid in back, ensuring that her hair didn't just get in her eyes. She gave a little nervous smile in Billy's direction and then looked up at Susan. She spoke to her for several moments before she gave her mother a tentative hug. It looked uncomfortable, but clearly she still missed her.

The rumble of Neil's truck is what first alerted Billy to Neil's presence. Neil didn't pull beside Billy in the driveway. Rather he put it in park across the street, and Max quickly looked from Neil to Billy before she bounded over to the Camaro in order to avoid another altercation.

As soon as the familiar sound reached his ears, panic twisted Billy's

gut. His eyes flickered to the truck idling across the street. The panic was joined by fear, then, and he hated himself for that. Neil wasn't even allowed to be near him, and here he was, fucking panicking like a god damned pussy. He grit his teeth and looked over as Max climbed into the car. He tried to not let Neil control him, to not give him any sort of power in that moment as he glanced at Max.

"You... you look really nice," Billy mumbled, but his voice was rough because Neil was right fucking there. He had to move. He had to get away. Billy yanked his car in first and his tires ate gravel as he bolted away from the house. His eyes stayed on the road because he didn't want to look at the truck. He didn't want to see Neil and his goddamn sneer.

After they were a bit further away, close to the school, Billy's shoulders began to relax and his breathing evened out. He licked his lips and tipped his head back onto his seat. He kept his eyes on the street, not trusting himself to look away just yet.

"How long until I gotta pick you up?" Billy asked. His voice lacked his usual malice. It had, recently, toward Max. He tried his best to be nice to her, even if sometimes he failed miserably at it. As he pulled into the lot of the middle school, his eyes flickered over to her.

Max kept glancing back up at Billy nervously. She knew that he was trying his best and she appreciated that. She scooted a little closer in the Camaro, "Everybody is going to stay until the end. Um...Lucas' parents talked about taking him out after, for like, a late night dinner. Would it be okay if I go too and they drop me off at the Chief's?" At least it fit with his plans with Steve, Dustin already knew Steve and Billy were together all the time.

"I um, I didn't know that he was going to be there. I'm sorry, Billy." Really it hadn't been her fault and at least he hadn't had to actually be standing in front of Neil.

"That's fine, Max. I trust his parents more than Neil," Billy's grip tightened on the wheel. He knew they would take care of her better than Susan or Neil, and wasn't that just bullshit? He frowned and leaned back into his seat. His nerves were on fire and he needed a smoke, or a quick drive. He glanced over to Max and then smiled a

little, even if it was strained.

“You didn’t know, Max. Neither did I. It’s fine. Just go have fun, yeah?” Billy reached out and almost patted her head. He paused, though, realizing her hair was done. He pulled his hand back and shifted awkwardly in his seat. “You--you do look really nice, Max. Almost as pretty as my mom.” He grinned at her, although it softened as he looked out the window.

Max smiled widely, she knew it was extreme praise coming from Billy and as they slowed to the school, it was easy to spot Steve’s car and Dustin exiting, his hair incredibly coiffed. She leaned over and hugged Billy hard, mumbled, “Thanks for taking me. I’m glad it’s you taking me...” Max pulled back quickly in embarrassment, her cheeks tinged pink as she smiled.

“I’m going to see you this weekend, right? We talked about that—that board shop by Chicago.” The prices should be reasonable this time of year, with the cold approaching, and it was hard to conceive of a better Christmas present for Max.

Billy tensed, but didn’t back off. He wrapped an arm around Max and gently squeezed her. His eyes dropped to her fiery red hair and he chuckled. “Yeah. Road trip, right? I owe you a board.” He gently pushed her toward the door. “Now get out of my car, you little shit. Have fun.” He nodded toward the entrance.

At that same moment, his eyes caught the BMW. Steve was in the driver’s seat--had just yelled something to Dustin. Billy watched him for a moment and paused, wondering what that look of pain was about that crossed his face. As he leaned back, he realized who Steve was looking at and felt something coil in his stomach. Oh. Nancy. He slid against his seat and worked his jaw. “I gotta catch some air, okay, Max? Gonna drive for like ten. Can you let Steve know?”

After all, Billy didn’t want to interrupt whatever the fuck was going on in Steve’s head while he was looking at Nancy. The coiling in his gut tightened and he gripped the steering wheel a bit tighter.

Max nodded and smiled at him, she glanced across the lot, watched several kids enter the school. It was her first real school dance and

she was happy, she had friends and even though things were painful, very painful sometimes, and she missed her mother terribly, Billy loved her, in his own way. "Okay, don't be super gross though and make out all the time. Boys don't like it when you're desperate." Max smirked at Billy before she bounded out of the car and across the parking lot.

Steve was still looking inside, his head tilted to the side. Steve didn't have to hide with Nancy, he could be stupid and cheesy with her. And even if Steve wasn't going to disrupt whatever she had with Byers, or cheat on Billy, there was something there and Billy knew Steve well enough to see it, even if he couldn't precisely identify it. They had been together for damn near a year, it made sense, right? Steve and Billy were together...what, a month?

Billy snorted at her comment and shook his head. Damn kid giving him dating advice. He rolled his eyes and then immediately pulled out another cigarette as the door shut. He pushed his car into first and swore under his breath as he pulled out of the lot. Ten minutes. He'd drive for ten minutes, get some air, and then they'd go on that stupid date Harrington was dying for. He cut it into second gear as soon as he could and fumbled to light his cigarette.

Once it was lit, Billy cracked the window and stared at the road. He was seeing but also not, thinking back to the look on Steve's face as he watched Nancy. He chewed on the inside of his cheek and then paused, glancing into his rearview mirror. Lights beamed into his car and he squinted. He knew those fucking lights. Shit. He would recognize the truck from anywhere.

Neil. He made a couple of turns and his anger, panic, and fear from everything boiled over as the truck continued to follow him. What the actual *fuck* did he want? He yanked his wheel to the side, pulling into the emergency lane on the two way road. Fine. If Neil wanted to fucking do this, he would. He kicked his door open and stepped out of his car, his boots crunching on the dirt and gravel.

Besides, at this point, Neil was breaking the restraining order. His ass would end up in fucking jail for this.

Neil parked behind Billy and he sat there for several long moments,

staring Billy down. Billy hadn't really seen him since court. He looked older though, somehow, perhaps a little leaner. Neil's hair was neatly trimmed in a buzz at the sides. The truck door opened with a loud creak and his father swung his legs out and stood on the gravel. Neil closed the door quietly and stood by the truck. He made no move to come over to Billy, but Billy knew this game. He knew it well. Billy was the dog and Neil was the master--Billy was the one who was supposed to come over.

There was an envelope in his hand, the same manilla color that his emancipation papers were in. Hopper had waved under his nose, called him an idiot for not giving a shit about a legal way to get Neil out of his life. Maybe this was finally going to be fucking done with. Neil didn't want him anyway. Why delay the inevitable?

Billy left the keys in the Camaro. The car was idling because he didn't plan on being here long. However, when his eyes dropped to the envelope, his heart stuttered. He jerked his eyes up to his father's face and tried not to sneer. Shit. He hated this game. He hated this fucking shit his dad put him up to. It was bullshit. Steve thought he knew bullshit? *This* was bullshit.

Cautiously, Billy made his way over to Neil's truck. He stopped a foot away from Neil. His stomach felt as if it was made of knots and his lungs fucking burned. He breathed slowly through his nose and leveled his eyes on Neil's. "Do you have something for me?" He asked, and he was damned proud that his voice stayed even. He didn't sound scared, despite the fact that his nerves were on fire and he wanted to fucking bolt.

"I do," Neil said, after a moment of measured silence. He looked Billy's face over, and it felt...strange, different. This was not something he was used to from Neil. It wasn't regret, but it was almost like Neil saw Billy for the first time. Neil held his head high and kept a tight hold of the envelope.

"All I ever tried to do was make a real man out of you. Teach you the right lessons, set you on the right path. It wasn't my fault you never listened, Billy." It was quiet and accusatory, this was more familiar. Breaking the restraining order was one thing, but both of them knew if he handed over those emancipation papers, Billy was just going to

be thrilled to be gone. So long as Neil didn't hit him, his father found just another way to worm through into Billy's heart, eat away at it until just the core was left.

Billy swallowed down the urge to say 'yes, sir'. It was sitting at the edge of his tongue, in his mind, circling his brain. He stuttered at first, his breathing becoming a little ragged as he tried to keep himself calm. They were on the road. It was public. He doubted Neil would actually do anything. He chewed on the inside of his cheek and glanced to the left, breaking eye contact for just a second.

Perhaps, if he said it, if he got this over with, he could take the envelope and just fucking go .

"Yes, sir," Billy ran his tongue over the top of his teeth. "I left my car idling. Can we just get this over with?"

Neil grunted and looked away, clutched the envelope for a moment. "You're still...with that boy , aren't you?" And there it was, what Neil really wanted to know. Was his only son still a faggot? It was shocking really that Neil didn't say it to him, especially when it was so clear that that was what he wanted say.

Billy had tried, really, to not like boys. But it didn't matter really what he did. Liking boys was just another way that Billy was disobedient. So was his mouth. His music. His car. It was all from the same place, because what Neil really hated was *Billy* --not his sexual preferences.

Billy froze, stared at Neil as his pulse raced beneath his skin. He felt his palms get sweaty and he resisted the urge to wipe them off on his jeans. His gaze flickered to Neil's truck and he shuddered out a slow breath. It really didn't matter at this point, right? Once he had the papers, or once he was eighteen, he was out and Neil couldn't do shit to him.

"Yeah, I am," Billy hesitated and then chewed on his lower lip. "I know it's not what--not what you wanted me to be. I know that. And I..." He wanted a fucking *dad* . His mom had been dead for years, and his dad treated him like shit. "I wish I could be--I wish that I was different, that I could change. I can't. I tried."

Neil clenched his jaw, clear that there was no way that Neil believed Billy. Billy was just a bad son, a bad child, and he never would amount to anything more than that. It was physically painful to stand there, if Neil hit him then at least Billy knew where he stood. But this was raw, like all the emotions that both of them held for each other in one palpable instant.

“You *will* be different, Billy. I’m going to make sure of that.” Neil fixed his intense gaze back on Billy and handed him the envelope. He stood there, one fist clenched as if Neil was going to deck Billy as soon as he grabbed the envelope.

Billy was never going to have a father, not really. Neil was nothing more than some D.N.A., he didn’t love Billy and if this was his fucked up idea of love then it was too much for Billy to handle. Broken ribs, teeth spit across the floor, his ear ripped open, his hair gone. It would never change.

“You aren’t going to do shit to me anymore,” Billy grit his teeth. He reached out and took the envelope. Despite the fact that there were papers in it, it felt heavy. “I did what I could, dad. If I can’t fucking change myself, no one can.” He stepped back and glanced down at the envelope. What if…?

Slowly, Billy pried the envelope open and tugged the papers out. His mouth went dry and his eyes widened as he looked over the documents. They weren’t emancipation papers. They weren’t anything that he had signed, but his fucking signature was on it.

“Wait--what the *fuck* ,” Billy shoved the envelope and papers back at Neil. “You can’t! I’m not joining the military! You can’t just fucking sign my signature like that! It’s against the fucking law!” Panic crept into his vision and his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. He refused to hold the papers and he heard them flutter to the ground. “Fuck you . *Fuck you* .” He spat and turned on his heel. He walked toward his car and the only thing he could think about was *Steve* .

Billy needed to get the fuck out of there.

His car was still idling and it felt like the only heat in that whole open space, Billy’s only refuge, when a large white van peeled out

down the road and screeched to a halt right in front of the Camaro. Approximately six people poured out from the vehicle. It wasn't military issue, but Billy knew it, and Billy knew when that man stepped out. Still dressed casually, maybe even in the same clothes as last time, and he smirked widely at Billy. Thing Two.

Neil just stood there, watched passively as the men approached Billy. How the hell was this possible? Thing Two chuckled a little and took out his gun from his holster. "Well, hello Billy. I'm sure I don't need to introduce myself again. Are we going to behave like I said the first time?" His gun was lowered to the ground, but he only needed a split second to hurt Billy, to kill him. "I think you should come with us, Billy. It was decided that you may be able to serve your country after all."

Billy had immediately slowed when the van parked itself in front of his car. His anger dissolved into panic as the men piled out and suddenly, he was back in the quarry with a gun shoved into his throat. He stumbled back and looked toward Neil, his eyes huge and wild. His lips parted as confusion boiled into his blood. Neil had? With them? He looked between them and then shook his head.

"No. No, you fucking--" Billy's eyes dropped to his gun and then to his car. The van was parked so that he couldn't leave, even if he managed to get into his car. If he reversed, he'd hit Neil. If he went forward, he'd hit the van. "You can't do this. I didn't... I did exactly as you said. I didn't get into any trouble. I didn't dig!"

The franticness in his voice made Billy want to *scream*. He wanted to go back, to sit at the parking lot, to say bye to Max again and then slide into Steve's BMW and go on their stupid fucking date. He glanced down at the guy's gun again and turned sharply on his heel. He was going to fucking *bolt*.

The gun rang out once, piercing in Billy's ears and for a second it was so certain that Thing Two shot him. He knew Billy was going to run. It wasn't as if they couldn't catch him, where would he go? No, it was just like his father. *Respect and responsibility*.

There was no pain despite the ringing in Billy's ears and his blood pumping hard through his system. Sometimes when Neil hit him,

Billy disconnected from the world, from his body. Maybe that was what getting shot was like. No pain, just the disconnect, and he would be gone from all of it.

There was a wet gasp behind him and when Billy turned, still expecting his own body to collapse under the weight of shutting itself down, there was Neil.

Neil's eyes were wide, crazed with shock, as his body hit the side of his truck door. There was blood bubbling past his lips, as Neil continued to open and close his mouth like a goldfish gasping for its last breath. There was a hole in his neck and the bullet had ripped through the driver window, even though Billy never heard it shatter over the humming in his head.

The blood poured in thick rivulets down Neil's neck, and he dumbly reached up and clasped his hand there, as if Neil's large hand could stop the flow. One of the hands he used so often so strike down Billy with. Neil slumped slowly down the door, a vividly dark red smear left behind in a downward streak against Neil's faded cherry red truck.

Billy knew his dad was fucked up. He knew that their relationship wasn't right. He knew that what his dad had done to him wasn't okay, but he couldn't help the small shout that left him when he realized that Neil was fucking *dying* in front of him. His breath gusted out of his lungs and he took a step towards his dad, his hands trembling as he fought back the urge to reach out.

Hating his dad was one thing. Seeing him murdered? That was on a completely different level. He yanked himself around so he could stare at the guy who shot him. If they were willing to kill Neil, they'd put a fucking bullet in his head, too. For a moment, he thought he could contain his panic, and then he was fucking hunched over and throwing up, his hand clasped on the side mirror of the Camaro.

After heaving all the contents of his stomach, Billy's eyes began to water. Fuck. He pushed himself up and swallowed. Not having any fight in him, not after seeing that, he stumbled toward the group of men.

“You’re--you’re not going to touch Max, right? Or--or Steve? If I go with you, it’s just me, right?” Billy tried to stand up straight, tried to keep his arms at his sides. But he couldn’t. He wrapped his arms around his midsection and felt himself tremble.

Billy didn’t know what they could possibly want with him. He didn’t know about any of this shit firsthand. He just saw that fucking dead creature. He couldn’t be of any use to them, any of them, any more than an average person. It was so quiet there; no rush of any nearby cars, no visible lights aside from the white-yellow of the headlights, and no noise behind him from Neil.

Thing Two sneered and then smiled at him, almost friendly. “We won’t touch any of them, so long as you’re a good boy.” And what he meant was dog. He killed Billy’s master so he could serve at the feet of another. The van door opened and out stepped a tall man. He was impeccably dressed, wearing a long coat. His short, white hair fell in thick waves over his head as he took Billy in, looked him up and down before he nodded slowly.

He walked towards Billy steadily, nobody else made any other move towards either of them, and when he finally reached Billy, it was like all the air had been sucked from his body. When he was close, Billy could see a series of lines over his face, leading down his neck, scars. His voice was soft, unlike his demeanor, “Billy Hargrove, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Dr. Martin Brenner.” He extended his hand, took Billy’s and shook it gently, so unlike what that moment felt like and it was disarming. “Follow me, please.” Brenner cupped a hand under Billy’s elbow and gingerly steered him towards the van.

Billy almost sneered at the guy, his lips curling. He was distracted by the door of the van, though, and his eyes tracked the man as he walked over to him. His mind was screaming, racing. A pleasure to meet him? To *meet him* ? His goon had just killed his dad (granted, he had been done with him, but *still*). How was this a fucking pleasure? He sucked in a sharp breath as Brenner took his elbow and steered him to the van.

At first, Billy almost tripped over his boots when they finally got to the open door. He didn’t want to get in. His Camaro was still running and his thoughts were on his dad and Steve and Max. Tears stung at

his eyes as he forced his feet to move, forced his legs forward and into the van. When he sunk into the seat, his hands dropped into his lap and his teeth almost began chattering behind his lips.

“What do you want with me?” Billy finally asked as he heard the door of the van click shut. His eyes flickered to Brenner, staying on him even as the van began to move.

Brenner sat there as the van pulled away. Somebody would have to notice something, right? His car, Neil’s truck, Neil’s body for god sake? But he remembered long nights of Steve’s hushed whispers against his skin, told him about Will’s fake body, how all of Hawkins thought he was dead aside from his mother.

“I need to correct a grave mistake that I made, Billy. You don’t mind if I call you that, do you?” Brenner almost seemed concerned that Billy would say that he did mind. It felt like they were the only people there, even with the soft chatter of some sort of radio up in the front of the van.

“You see, we’ve always know about the tremendous power of other worlds, of other dimensions, of special people. But things like that, they aren’t easily won. Some people lose heart, but I can see the big picture, and you, Billy, I’m going to make *you* special. I just need a good soldier.”

Billy had a feeling that even if he did have a problem with it, Brenner would continue to call him by his name. It felt wrong hearing it from him, but he didn’t stop him, nor did he actually say it was okay. He continued to sit quietly, listening beyond the ringing that was still in his ears from the gunshot. He ran his thumb over his own hand and couldn’t help but think of Steve. It almost forced him to not listen, but he made himself stay in the present.

“How the fuck can I be made special?” Billy ran his fingers through his hair, then, and swallowed down the urge to throw up again. “That doesn’t make any damned sense.” He tried to think about what he and Steve spoke about. His mind tried to filter through all of the information, frantically trying to find a connection between what was being said and what had happened with the kids and Steve.

It was the one detail that Steve was always purposely vague about. It was Billy who managed to put together that it had something to do with Hopper's daughter, the little girl of glossy brown curls he sometimes saw when he dropped Max off. She was different and somehow a part of all of this. Billy hadn't pressed Steve at the time, knew that Steve tried to be respectful towards Hopper, since Billy technically wasn't supposed to know any of this. But she seemed like an ordinary kid, not "special."

"It make some time, Billy, but I have faith. Faith in the *process* . All you have to do is listen, listen and do everything that I ask of you. It's the only way that we're going to be able to accomplish this. And at the end, you'll finally see just how special you are, Billy." The van tilted forward, the light from the outside suddenly dim even in the van. Underground, they were going underground or a tunnel-there would be more light otherwise.

Steve had to know he wouldn't just leave him, right? What would he think when Billy didn't show up that night? And the following night? What would Max think when he wasn't there to take her to the board shop?

Faith. This asshole had faith in him. Billy would have laughed if he wasn't so terrified. He pressed his lips together, instead, and slouched back against the seat. He tilted his head away from Brenner, obviously ending his part of the discussion as he stared at the side of the van. No windows, but was that all that surprising? He curled his fingers into his jeans and closed his eyes.

Maybe Steve and Max would know there was something wrong. Maybe it would be clear that Billy wouldn't have left, especially considering his Camaro was still there. But had they done something to it? He wasn't even sure how many guys there had been there. What if one took off with it? He grit his teeth and pushed himself into the seat, let his head fall back.

Why did Billy always have to listen to someone? Do something? Follow someone? It was always by another person's choice. Everyone's but his own. He licked his lips and decided that, no matter what happened, he would escape these fucking people and he would go back to Steve and Max. He would do whatever it took, no

matter what they told him to do.

Notes for the Chapter:

The Duffers have said they are unsure if Brenner is dead, since we all should have seen an on-screen death, so he is very much alive here. Tags will get updated as we go, heavy angst and violence coming up. Promise it will be worth it in the end!

20. Chapter 20

Summary for the Chapter:

Trigger warning for explicit torture scene with Billy, and we made sure to place a break for anybody who'd like to skip that section.

Hang tough kids, we're at the top of the rollercoaster.

Steve got out of his car and impatiently tapped his foot before he glanced down his watch for the 17th time that evening. This was not ten minutes. This was a lot longer than ten minutes. Steve knew it was going to be hard for Billy, be back in the house with all those fucking memories and remain strong for Max. Maybe Steve just picked the wrong night for this shit, for a date. That was fine, but for Billy to just not return? Not fine. He waited in the parking lot, getting in and out of his car and gently kicking at his tires, just to have something to do.

He could see Mrs. Byers and Hopper off in some corner of the parking lot. Steve stared at them for just a moment before he slid back into his seat. It felt like he was intruding on their privacy. Steve bounced his knee and chewed his lower lip. It was just more normal bullshit, he was upset, pissed off, and worried. The asshole could have told Steve himself, told Steve just not tonight. It was just that Billy seemed...well, so anxious that morning. Steve knew they couldn't be like a boy and girl couple, not like what he had with Nancy, but he didn't have that same thing with Billy anyway. What he had with Billy was *deeper* and the asshole was just fucking gone.

When the dance was over and all the kids raced out to their parents, laughing loudly and screaming in delight, Steve was *pissed*. Stood up. He got stood up. That's what happened. He waited out here like a fucking idiot and he was going to yell at Billy, feel like fucking shit, and then be a fucking idiot to just forgive him again. And that pissed him off too. When he saw Lucas with Max in tow, he jogged up to her. "Hey, did anything happen at the house?" Steve didn't say Billy was gone, he just wasn't there. And the blonde told Max he needed some time.

Max had been talking to Lucas about some absurdity that had happened at the dance when Steve interrupted her. She frowned and paused, her gaze swept over the lot, as if she expected the Camaro to just be there like it always was. When her eyes came back to Steve, the frown deepened.

“Well--Neil showed up. But they didn’t talk or anything. Neil stayed on the other side of the road. Billy didn’t... take it well, but like I told you, he said he needed ten minutes or something to cool off,” Max shrugged and then looked over to Lucas. She gave him a nod, letting him know that she’d catch up. After he walked forward, she glanced back at Steve.

“Why? What’s up? Where’s Billy?” The look on Steve’s face put her on edge. It wasn’t strange for Billy to disappear. Not really. He had done it multiple times before, especially on nights where she had heard a lot of yelling between him and Neil. Yet, this was weird. Billy seemed to genuinely care for Steve, who, right now? Looked ready to punch a certain blonde.

Steve sighed and rubbed the back of his head in frustration as his eyebrows knitted. He hadn’t know that, it made more sense then. He couldn’t exactly be that mad at Billy, just...had to give him a little time. If Steve pushed Billy, the only thing he could expect was to be pushed back.

“It’s fine, he’s just...he didn’t come back. Probably needed more time to think.” Steve smiled down at her and rubbed her head, earning him a little displeased look, but the dance was over and her hair was already coming loose. “Look, just go have fun with Sinclair. I’m sure he’s back at the house or something.” He needed to take Dustin home now anyway, listen to the little shit and calm down before he saw Billy again. It probably wasn’t even that intentional, it was just...easy to get lost in those thoughts and lose track of time.

Steve smiled at her before he hurried back to his car, spying Dustin coming out of the auditorium all smiles. “Hey, so did it go okay? ”

Max’s frown stayed but she nodded, anyway, and headed after Lucas. It wasn’t weird for Billy to run off and blow some steam. She wouldn’t doubt he’d be around later, and then she’d probably hear

Steve going all mom on him about disappearing and shit.

Dustin looked up at Steve and grinned. He ignored the fact that most girls had, well, ignored him. His eyes creased even further as he climbed into the car and buckled himself in (Steve would literally not move the car until he did). “Actually... yeah, I gotta dance with a pretty cute girl.”

Granted, that girl was Steve’s ex--but he didn’t have to tell him that. He sank against the seat and tapped his fingers on his legs, excitement still buzzing through his system. He leaned over and checked his hair in the side mirror, placing a few pieces back where they belong.

“Oh yeah?? What did I tell you man, you totally nailed it!” Steve grinned at him and refused to think about Billy for the moment. Space was important and Billy was moody and thoughtful when he was like this. It wasn’t like the guy wasn’t entitled to a little time alone.

“Eh--don’t touch it so much, you style it and leave it be--so! The next thing is going to be finding a nice girl, somebody who you have stuff in common with.” Steve knew that Dustin had this crush on Max, but that was going to be quickly over. No way Dustin was going to get in between her and Lucas, because no matter what Steve said that morning, Dustin was too good a kid to inherit his former throne. Steve started to drive back to Dustin’s home, watched all the cars slowly leave the parking lot. No Camaro.

Dustin rolled his eyes and tilted his head so he could look at Steve. “Really? You know how hard it is to find a girl who even knows what Dungeons and Dragons is? I couldn’t even come up with a character sheet that they’d understand.” Of course, unless it’s Max. But Dustin wasn’t dumb. He knew the ‘electricity’ was hotter between Lucas and Max than it was with him. But then again, Dustin wasn’t stupid. High school was four full years. Anything could happen.

“But if you can get chicks with your mom attitude? I can get them,” Dustin nodded sagely, grinning to himself. He knew that would tick Steve off, but that was just part of the game: irritating Steve was *fun* .

Steve side-eyed Dustin with a hot glare, "I don't have a *mom attitude* . Keeping you shits in line just brings out the worst in me." Not to mention that it had been a long time since Steve had picked up any chicks. And he certainly wasn't like this when he did so. Everything was just casual and flirtatious, a soft touch at the right time, a pleasant buzz at a party that gave him enough confidence to say what he wanted--babysitter wasn't on the menu.

"Am I picking up you brats for your game this weekend? You know Max won't be there, Billy is taking her to Chicago." Billy had mentioned it to Steve, implied it would be fine for Steve to come, but he refused. It would be good for Billy to just be with his sister. "You know if you spend the night at my place, you can't bug my parents. They're in town until next week." One week, that's what Steve said to Billy.

"Brings out the worst?! How about the best!" Dustin laughed and shook his head. "Seriously, Steve. You're way cooler than you were like, a year ago. You sucked then. Majorly." He nodded and looked out the window as the car started to travel down the road. His ears perked up at the idea of being at Steve's for a game. The food was always amazing and Steve, for whatever reason, always treated them.

"Yeah, yeah. You're picking us up, and we won't bug them," Dustin huffed. "Not like they'd even notice we were there, anyway." He shrugged. "And what's in Chicago that's so important? Our game is important. What if we *need* Max? Hell, Billy plays your character better than you. What if we need him!?" He threw his hands up and huffed.

Steve made no comment about "sucking" a year ago, even though he secretly conceded the point. Some part of himself now had been in King Steve then and vice versa, it was just a better balance now. It was strange to think about how he may have never changed, as it felt so palpably distinct now. Would he have stayed with Nancy? Gone back to help the kids? Been friends with Billy? Both of them in that persona was an interesting thought.

"I think you'll manage to survive without Billy and Max for one round of the game." Even if that round was going to last the entire day. Honestly, Steve wished Billy would be there, so he wouldn't

have to be fucking criticized by junior high brats about going into random dark tunnels. "He's going to take her to Chicago, I think he's going to get her a new skateboard for Christmas."

In reality, it warmed Steve to think about Billy like that. He might never say anything to Max, but Billy liked to show that he cared, that he was affectionate, and his relationship with Max was so much stronger now.

"Oh man," Dustin blinked, "She's going to love that, Steve. I bet she's going to pick the most expensive board just to piss him off." He snickered and almost unbuckled himself before they reached the house. Of course, he stopped because he knew Steve would gripe at him for it. He waited until the tires slowed and the car actually stopped moving before he twisted the seatbelt off.

"By the way," Dustin looked over his shoulder as he began to open the door. "We're not stupid, y'know. We can tell that--that you and Billy have something going on." He grinned at Steve. "Electricity, right?" Dustin wasn't stupid, after all, and neither was the Party. That night, when they were all crowded around, Dustin had witnessed the looks between the two and the random physical brushes they had when they walked by each other.

Part of him was glad that Steve had moved beyond Nancy, but the other part was weary because it was Billy Hargrove. "I guess he isn't going to pound your face in again, huh?" He laughed and climbed out of the car.

Steve's eyes were impossibly wide as he choked on some air, twisted in his seat to face Dustin. Steve was never really good at lying, not on the spot anyway. It had to be crafted out in his head, methodically planned, and spontaneity wasn't his thing. "No-I--" Steve swallowed hard and his hands gripped the steering wheel, unsure of what to actually say.

Billy probably wouldn't care that the kids knew, didn't care much for any negative opinions aside from Max. But Billy wasn't Steve, and this little curly-haired shit's opinion mattered a great deal to him. "You're not....?" Steve didn't need to finish, there were many questions wrapped in the one: was Dustin mad, disgusted, hated him,

thought of Steve the same way that young boys tended to think about other queer boys?

Dustin rolled his eyes and leaned into the car, his hair brushing the top of the door frame. "Don't even try to lie. Friends don't lie, right?" His eyes narrowed on Steve and then he grinned, bright as ever. "I'm not what, Steve? You're a part of the Party. You're our friend. It would be shitty to hate you for something like that. I mean, you'd think you'd find someone nicer than Billy Hargrove, but..." He shrugged, "Like you said, can't help the electricity."

Although, Dustin did pause. "Just... be careful? I mean, you changed. Obviously. Maybe he can, too, but sometimes he gets this look in his eyes." Dustin shrugs then. "It's sorta creepy, to be honest." He stepped back and gripped the door. "At least I don't gotta worry about babies," he laughed, knowing it would turn Steve *red*, and slammed the door closed before making a beeline to the front door.

Steve watched Dustin go inside before he loudly groaned and hit his head against the steering wheel several times. That was so damn unexpected, all of that was unexpected. Dustin had said "we can tell," so it had to be more than just him and Max, right? Did Wheeler know and mention something to Nancy? He cursed softly, Steve honestly thought they were pretty careful. The whole thing was just odd--all of a sudden he was with the guy who beat the shit out of him. Of course they thought about what that could mean.

Steve pondered Dustin's words, Billy's look. He knew what Dustin was referring to, of course. It was frightening and intense, especially to a casual observer. But Steve wasn't a casual observer any longer, and around sharp edges, there was a lot of pain and regret in that look, like Billy couldn't stop, but also hated himself for it. Steve had grown accustomed to it, but not scared. It was mostly Neil's look, that same glare the man had on his face when Steve threatened him with a bat, because it was so easy to lose control and hurt somebody. Even worse, *enjoy* hurting somebody.

But then there was long nights and tender whispers of "baby" in Steve's ear, before Billy held him tightly and kissed over his face. There was the soft flutter of Billy's eyelashes when he was flirting with Steve, his voice dropping with a light smirk dancing on his lips.

There was Billy with tears in his eyes in frustration whenever Steve was too upset himself. Steve couldn't dismiss one look over another. Steve started his car and began to drive home, steeling himself for a terrible conversation with the blonde.

Except, Steve found the house empty except for his parents. Billy wasn't anywhere to be found, and nothing seemed to be out of place. It was like the blonde hadn't come back, hadn't returned to the house after his drive. However, his mom sat at the table, sipping a glass of wine and looking through a large book that held different types of fashion designs. Her eyes flickered to Steve and she smiled.

"Hello, Steven," Only his mother still called him that. She stood and grabbed an envelope off of the table. "A gentleman came by earlier and said this was for you? He was extremely polite. He held himself well, too. A fine young man." As if she was hinting at something--that perhaps Steve could be following in that man's footsteps. "He seemed almost military-like."

With a perfectly manicured hand, the woman handed the envelope over to Steve. "He didn't elaborate on what it was for, darling. Just said that I should give it to you the next time I see you."

Opening it around her probably wasn't the best idea, and given that Billy hadn't shown up? That may mean that there was something more to this than what Steve had originally thought. Once he was in his room, he tore the envelope open and evened out the page--a single page. It looked like it was torn out of a notebook and the writing was done in pen. It looked like Billy's handwriting--half cursive, half print.

Steve,

I can't be what you want me to be. We can't be what you want us to be. I can't show you off like I can a gal, and you can't do the same for me, either. This isn't... going to work, and I think I need time to get myself together. I need time to find myself. Does that even make sense?

I'm sorry, Steve. I don't know if I'll be back. I probably won't be. Please, just... understand that I need this. I need it and you can't suffer because of me.

Billy

Steve stared at the piece of paper for what felt like several hours, just reading it over and over again. “No,” was the only thing he whispered, just once, as he blinked. He kept reading it, looked at the hastily scribbled letter so long he saw the paper more than the words written on it. Steve just held onto it, like all of a sudden if he just read it one time more, *held on a little longer*, it was going to finally say something different.

Because this couldn't be real. Not after last night. Jobs. An apartment. Holidays. Together. Steve quickly shook his head, why would he just say all this and write this letter? Because Steve asked for one date? They had been through so much, and sure Billy was nervous, but enough for an argument or a cheap shot. Billy didn't say things he didn't mean, and just because the guy could manipulate people (including Steve), doesn't mean he did so freely.

Steve sat heavily on his bed, they were just in there, Billy calling him gorgeous and kissing him with more feeling than Steve ever experienced before the blonde burst into his life. Billy wouldn't just...would he?

The tears filled his eyes slowly, and Steve held them there until they were thick, heavy, with an actual weight to them, before he blinked, caused the tears to roll down his cheeks. Steve didn't want what he had with girls to be like what he had with Billy. It was an *inferior* affection, an *inferior* way of living the life he wanted. Who cared if Steve couldn't kiss him in public when there were heated kisses across his bed, Billy groaning “princess” in a way that Steve would never tell him that he enjoyed? Wasn't all that better than a fucking

move? Didn't Billy think that meant more to Steve than ordering at a fucking restaurant?

The pained cry that bubbled up inside him spilled out, from the pit in his twisted stomach up to his lips. The tears were hot and he sobbed loudly, so loudly that he didn't hear his mother come in, a little frantic and then surprised at seeing her son crumple forward on his bed in despair.

Billy was gone, *he was just gone* .

~**~

When Brenner told Billy to obey, to do as he told him, he hadn't thought *this* was going to be part of it. He struggled at first, fought against one of the men until the butt of the gun was brought down on his face. The bruise blossoming there hurt more than what Neil could have ever done, and it had subdued Billy enough to make him do exactly what he was being told to do.

The chair was cold. It could be because it was iron, metal, but it could also be because Billy was naked. He was naked and shivering in a cold fucking room. His face pulsed and his head hurt and he fucking hated this. It made no sense. None of it did. Why tie him to a chair? Why make him sit here like this? What was the point?

Billy tugged at the ropes around his wrists experimentally. They didn't budge despite the fact that the veins in Billy's arms were more pronounced with his struggle. He slumped back into the chair and hissed.

"What the *fuck* , Brenner!" He shouted, furious and half-hysterical.

"It's a little difficult to fully understand what enables a person to be gifted. We've done countless experiments and so much of it comes down to chance. It's strange really, but what isn't chance...can be manufactured." Brenner looked to the side and a small woman in a lab coat stepped to the forefront, carrying a small tray. Billy could see

three separate syringes, each filled with a different colored liquid, and two scalpels.

“The best we can figure is extreme emotional distress, it unlocks something deep inside a person. Well, that, and just a few compounds from another world. What is it that the children refer to it as, the Upside-Down?” Brenner looked back at Billy, inquired calmly, as if he asked for the time.

The nurse approached Billy, her face impassive. How many other kids had she done this to, seen it done on? “I am afraid this might hurt, Billy. I had to ensure that we had a highly concentrated dosage in order to accelerate the process. I can’t exactly take a decade cultivating you, now can I?” Brenner smiled at him gently, so antithetical to what he was about to do.

Billy clenched his fists as Brenner spoke. His eyes dropped to the needles, the liquid, the scalpels. His stomach lurched and his mouth began to feel dry. Wait, what? He blinked and looked back at Brenner. Realization was slowly dawning on him and how the *fuck* hadn’t he seen this earlier?

“You’re going to torture me,” Billy murmured. Hearing it spoken out loud made it a reality and Billy squirmed in his chair. He tried, with all of his fucking strength, to pull himself free of his restraints. “This is--this is fucking inhumane! You can’t do this! How is this--how does this make someone special? Brenner, you’re fucking *insane* .”

It was then that he fixed his eyes on the nurse as she picked up the first syringe. He shoved himself back into his chair, as if he could fucking escape, and even spat at her as she got close to him. That didn’t seem to deter her, though, and the needle was pushed into his arm, along one of his veins. He stared down at it, terrified, as she pressed down on the plunger and shot the liquid into his body.

It didn’t feel like much of anything, not at first anyway, before the cold seeped into every fiber of his being and made Billy’s teeth chatter so hard, it felt like they were going to break. Brenner just watched him intently as others stepped forward, hooked him up to several devices and machines, electrodes to his chest. When the heart monitor came on, he could hear his own heartbeat slow down,

unnaturally slow. Brenner simply cocked his head to the side and he was speaking to Billy--but it was hard to hear what he was saying.

The stuff could kill him, had to be able to kill him. Nothing really alive could live down there; Steve had described it once--the air fucking oppressive and it hung all around you, clung to your skin, pressed you inside yourself. That had been a bad night for Steve, imagining being back there, and it was what Billy felt like on the *inside*.

“Don’t worry Billy, it will pass, it always passes.” It was hard to keep his head up, his eyes open, it was just so fucking cold. Like ice was inside him, spreading, and luring him away--not to sleep. Billy knew about hypothermia, no, this was just there, crystallizing inside you until you wanted to die. It was unclear how long he was like that, his vitals being checked, small lights flashing in his eyes to check his pupils. But it was going to be just him, Max and Steve would be okay.

The cold lasted. Brenner said it would pass, but it didn’t feel like it would. Billy felt like he was frozen for *years* before his body finally began to warm and he didn’t feel like fucking death anymore. He gasped out when he started to feel his limbs again, his fingers, his skin. He struggled to open his eyes, to think, to pull his head up enough to glare at Brenner.

“Fuck. You,” Billy managed, but his voice was breathless and there was a lack of conviction to it. Yes, Billy still meant it, but that had only been one of the syringes. There were two left, and what the fuck did Brenner think he was going to do with the knives? He pulled at his arms, and this time, it wasn’t even enough to budge his wrists against the ropes.

At least he had thrown up next to the Camaro. There wasn’t anything in his stomach if he did decide to vomit. He rolled his head back and opened his eyes enough to look at the ceiling. His mind wandered to Steve again, to Max. He just had to keep thinking about them. That would get him through this.

They had to notice he was gone, maybe not tonight because Billy told Max that he needed some time to himself after Neil. Neil, who was

now dead on the side of the road. It was so overwhelming that it was almost easier to shut down, to turn everything off. Maybe Steve would figure out what happened, but how would he get him out of here? Hell, did he even want Steve to get him out? He would end up just like Neil. A bat wasn't a match for a gun, no matter how many Steve had.

If he hadn't left, would it be Steve in this position, would Steve have ended up like Neil had? It was hard to say. The second syringe was lifted from the tray, just as things were slowly starting to come into focus, even though he still felt so cold.

They had done this before, many times, Brenner said. If Billy was lucky, they had done it enough times to not kill him. There was no point in any of this though. Billy wouldn't ever be "special," and even if he was, what would that mean for these people? To use him like some sort of circus freak?

Right when Billy felt like he was actually getting his bearings, feeling somewhat fucking normal, the nurse prepared the second syringe. He would have kicked his body back, pushed himself back into the chair, if he had any hopes that it would actually do anything. Unfortunately, he knew better, and he knew that whatever they threw at him was going to hurt or make him feel senseless for a while.

"What is that going to do?" Billy tensed as the nurse walked forward and held his breath. His heels dug into the floor, and it was probably a good thing that the damned chair was screwed or cemented or some shit because if it hadn't, he would have toppled backward. As soon as the needle plunged in, Billy felt like throwing up. He didn't want this. He didn't want to deal with whatever this liquid would do to him.

Maybe if he thought enough about Steve and Max, he could ignore it.

There was that morning, Steve clinging to him, kissing him hard, grinning and teasing him down the stairs, somebody who wanted Billy-actually *wanted* Billy more than anybody else had ever wanted him in his entire life. And Max, her face glowing when she stepped out of the house, her hair pulled back, hugging Billy in the Camaro in

gratitude. Their trip--he wasn't going to be able to get her a new board for Christmas.

The second syringe was blissful, for just a moment. The cold eased and Billy was floating, just like if he had some really good weed back in California, a joint passed amongst his friends. The people in the room fuzzed and blurred in his vision; their voices were unintelligible. The words were long and drawn out, too long to be actual words versus just animalistic sounds. That was until the heat came.

When the heat started, it wasn't sudden like the cold. It was slow, very slow, like Billy was boiling from the inside. There was some cruel joke about slowly boiling a frog alive. He was sweating and his heart rate was steadily picking up. The people in the room were excitedly talking about his responses then, he could barely hear them over the sound of his brain frying in his skull, but they were impressed. Imagine being impressed with Billy Hargrove like this.

The most interesting part of it, though, was that Billy didn't cry out. He didn't scream. He grit his teeth and sucked in lungful after lungful of air, choking on the pain as it boiled and set him on fire. Billy would have curled up on himself if he could have, but the restraints across his shoulders and chest prevented it. He whined at that and pushed forward, anyway, wanting desperately to close his body off, to hide himself from the curious eyes and the fucking doctor, who may or may not be talking--Billy had no idea.

The ropes began to leave marks on his skin as Billy struggled. He couldn't even think about Max or Steve at this point. Thought was lost to him and he was fucking *sure* he was crying at this point. Still, he didn't make much more than a moaning noise in the back of his throat.

At least the fire died out quicker than the ice had. It left him like a sudden drop off, a cliff, and he was trembling in the damned chair when he finally came to. He blinked several times, but the blurriness around him stayed. His body shuddered and relaxed, slumping against the metal of the chair. He was sweaty now, he could feel that much. He heard distant talking, but he was too busy trying to collect himself to pay attention.

The sweat from his skin allowed the ropes to cut deeply into his flesh, and when he came to, he could see the large angry, red burns, with tiny purple bruises splashed across his skin from where he must have exerted himself too hard.

“I’m not sure if we should go through with the third injection, Dr. Brenner. He’s an older test subject and his heart rate is already dangerously high.” The nurse’s voice was low, like she didn’t want Billy to hear him, but also like she didn’t think that Billy could take the pain.

His thoughts were like embers, disappearing into the night air, but stoked every so often. What if he did become special, like they said? What could special mean? Maybe it could mean hurting these people, killing them, driving them far away enough so that they never hurt another person again and left the people Billy cared about actually alone.

Dr. Brenner knelt down in front of Billy, and it was only from the angle then that Billy could see that his body was taut and shaking hard. He wasn’t even aware of it and certainly didn’t know how to stop it. Billy had no control there, over the lab or his own body.

“What do you think Billy? Do you think you can take one more shot?” His voice was as delicate as always, and it was clearly meant to be encouraging, but the idea of punching the man in the face until he had no teeth left was what put Billy on edge. Could he take it? One more fucking needle? It might kill him, but there was also a strange moment here: a choice.

Perhaps not a true choice, not a right of ultimate refusal, because one day that third shot would happen whether Billy wanted it or not. But right now? All anybody ever fucking wanted was to fuck with Billy and paint him into a corner, didn’t matter if it was God, Neil, or Brenner.

His thoughts clanged around in his head as Billy lulled his head forward and grunted. He didn’t have enough energy to actually pick his head back up. He opened his eyes to look at Brenner again, to stare down at him. He hated how his body felt. He hated how dry his mouth was and how much his skin crawled, as if he had fucking

spiders scattering beneath the first layer. He squirmed against the seat, but only long enough to exhaust himself, which wasn't fucking long at all.

Finally, Billy's shoulders sagged and he felt something in him just not give a shit. If it wasn't now, it would be later, right? They would find a time to give it to him and he would have to suffer through it, even if he didn't want it. This choice that was being given to him was only asking when Billy wanted to suffer most--now or later.

"Now," Billy muttered. His voice was hoarse, and he wondered if he had made more sounds than he thought. He couldn't remember all of it, so he wouldn't doubt it. He licked his lips, and even though he chose now, he went completely rigid as the nurse picked up the final syringe and walked over to him.

It was then that Billy could pick up just a tad bit of emotion in her, as if she knew what was coming. He tensed, but his muscles shook so much that he couldn't keep it up. He dropped his head back as she slid the needle home and pushed the liquid into his body.

It wasn't cold. It wasn't warm. There was just pain, *incredible* pain. Every single nerve in his body had been hit and Billy jerked violently in the chair, dislocating his right shoulder almost instantly from the force of it. The heart monitor made a long, steady, hissing ring, but he was still moving, still alive, even as that fucking nurse took a step back in horror.

Maybe this wasn't the way it was supposed to go, or maybe this was the way it was supposed to go for people who were supposed to *die* . For *failures* . Brenner watched him in mute fascination. Billy was salivating, his nose bleeding, before his other shoulder dislocated, as well. He heard the pop more than felt it; the area didn't hurt any more than the rest of his body--spasming and cramping over the din of the excited chatter of the few in the room.

Billy didn't welcome death, but at the very least, he had been treated kindly the past month for the first time since his mother died. The rope dug into his sternum, slowly cracking it and cutting into the flesh so that blood began to run down his abdominals. Maybe he would see her; she believed in Heaven and if anybody deserved to go

there, it was her.

Thoughts of his mother left him as Billy finally *screamed* . His voice became hoarse with it, his vision blanketed by various colors--white, black, dots of pink and blue and red as his body felt like it was being torn apart. He couldn't feel his arms, couldn't feel his legs. He could barely feel his body--all he knew was pain. All he heard was his own screaming--loud and unforgiving in his ears. He ended up half-choking on sobs as his body convulsed and refused to listen to him, refused to acknowledge that his brain was even there.

The sobs melted into desperate mumbling and he, for the life of him, couldn't even make sense of it himself. He may have been begging for his mom, for Steve, for Max. He wasn't sure, but the pain didn't stop. It continued to wreck him, to tear him apart, and he felt like every fiber of his being was peeling, forced apart by whatever liquid was in the syringe.

Then, Billy tasted blood. He knew his mouth wasn't bleeding. He knew he hadn't bit into his cheeks. His nose. It had to have been his nose, because a moment later, he couldn't breathe through it. Instead, he had to take wet gasps through his mouth as the blood dripped over his lips and dotted his thighs.

It didn't end as quickly as the first two; the pain was consistently intense and Billy had been babbling to end it. And then they gathered around him, undoing his restraints, his entire body vibrating in pain. There was more blood than he thought, some of it already drying on his skin and there were flecks of brownish red blood flecked along where the ropes were.

They picked him up, lifted him up really, and Billy felt weak. Somehow, he managed to put some weight on his feet, just for a brief moment when his thigh bones cracked loudly and tore through the skin there. It sounded like a bat hitting a home run and Billy was on the ground--they dropped him in their shock.

Billy was coming undone. Everything inside of him was shattering and being torn apart, and he could feel it happening with every single nerve ending lighting up different parts of his brain. He had thrown up again, just bile, but it mixed with the blood there as

Brenner stared down at him with a grim expression.

Between the pain and his throwing up, Billy was trying desperately to beg, to plead, to make it *stop* . But everything kept going dark and then lighting up again. His body didn't feel like his own, and his screaming had started again. Billy didn't even know he could scream for that long, that loud, until all that came out of him were high-pitched whines because his vocal chords simply couldn't do it anymore.

"Please, please, *please* ," Billy couldn't even move his limbs anymore. He could barely keep his eyes open, could barely fucking breathe. He was going to die. *He was going to die* because of whatever they shot him full of and there was nothing he could do about it. He hoped for darkness at that point, to pass out, to go unconscious so he didn't have to deal with this anymore.

Yet, the pain kept him there, kept him barely above the pull of blackness that tore at his mind. He choked on some of the blood in his throat and began to sob again, tears dripping from the bridge of his nose and onto the floor. Thoughts weren't even a thing anymore, his attention pulled between the breaking and explosions of pain through his body and darkness.

Brenner knelt down slowly, taking him in and gently tilting his head, as if Billy was a small insect that the man managed to discover in his home and was about to release. "Normally, it's a slower process. After all, it's meant to work on children. But you're nearly a man now, Billy, and I had to use an especially concentrated dose. Can you tell me...what you're feeling right now?"

Brenner reached out and tenderly touched Billy's wrist. It broke almost instantly, just as if Brenner had used a hammer on it. There was a sort of mute fascination as he pressed a little harder there, the bones slowly peeking up from under Billy's skin like a newborn baby bird hatched from an egg.

"I've never seen it work this fast before. Do you think it's because you're older or because of the concentration?" He hummed, gently rolling Billy's arm as his forearm shattered, moved like a rolling pin inside him.

“It’s amazing, really. I knew I was right about you. You’re going to be amazing, Billy Hargrove.”

Billy couldn’t even scream or beg anymore. His jaw became slack as Brenner touched him, hurt him, and he choked on the sobs that crept up his throat. He didn’t know the answers to the questions. He didn’t even hear the last comment about him being amazing. He could only feel pain as his bones broke and his skin split. His eyes snapped closed and he was throwing up again, but only blood escaped him--bubbled and frothy.

He could only manage another small, garbled plea, but at this point, he didn’t have enough energy to talk. Didn’t have enough energy to move or keep his eyes open. He was awake, but everything was too fucking much. Billy closed his eyes and whimpered, instead, crumpled in a heap on the floor of a lab that wasn’t supposed to be running.

21. Chapter 21

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve and the Party are on the case!

We can't let Billy suffer forever...right?

Within a week, basically everyone accepted that Billy simply left school and went to join the military. There wasn't a fuss, no fanfare. The school had been notified, and very few people really took note of Billy Hargrove's absence. He left as quickly as he blew into town. People like Billy didn't belong in Hawkins, so for most, it just made sense. Rumors regarding his family were already swirling around town, so how else was he going to easily get away from his father? The military provided for you, and in Hawkins, was an honorable profession. If anything, Billy's reputation might have been strengthened by leaving to join the military. And then the town started to forget about him after about two days of gossip.

Everyone except Steve Harrington. It looked normal really, somehow Steve and Billy became friends before Billy left town. So to most of the world, Steve was just a sad kid who missed a friend.

But what Steve really felt was that he was hollow. He sat there during lunch, barely touching his meal or mechanically eating a few bites, lost in thought. It was always easy for Steve to blame himself for things, so it's what he did. He pushed Billy. Billy wasn't even remotely used to any of this and Steve kept wanting more. If Steve had just accepted things as they were, accepted Billy as a fucked up soul, who was a little more comfortable fucking Steve than sharing, he wouldn't be gone right now.

A french fry was chucked in his direction and he jerked his head up to look at the worried faces of Nancy and Jonathan. Steve had dark circles under his eyes; the nightmares were back in full force, but Billy was there now too--loud and pitiful screams somehow still quieter than the crunching sound of demodog bites on Billy's flesh.

"Steve," Nancy frowned and leaned forward. "You look... awful. You

haven't been sleeping again." It wasn't a question. She already knew. Despite their break up, Steve and Nancy had been doing... okay. Over that month, she had actually watched Steve return to some semblance of normal. He had been sleeping, at least, and he had that stupid grin of his back. All before Billy up and disappeared. It didn't make sense to her, but it did piss her off that the California boy would do that to Steve.

"Is there anything we can do?" Nancy worried her lower lip between her teeth and reached out to settle her hand over Steve's. "Please, talk to us."

Steve smiled at Nancy and could see Byers glance at their hands on the table, even though he didn't say anything. He shrugged and gently withdrew his hand, rested it on the bench. He imagined the times he squeezed Billy's thigh there, occasionally gave a quick squeeze to his hand.

"What is there to say? I'm fine." Steve noted that she said he wasn't sleeping "again." He never really pulled the wool over his eyes on that one. He had been drinking a lot of coffee, and while it did the trick for the most part, his leg continuously bounced under the nervous strain. Steve was going to have to pick up the shifts today. Max hadn't been inconsolable when Billy disappeared, but *very* angry, and demanded to see the handwritten note. Steve allowed it to happen, as it was something he poured over often enough.

Max didn't say it wasn't Billy's handwriting, and she was more familiar with it than Steve. All she said was, "I don't get it." Well, neither did Steve. Billy didn't take her to the board shop that weekend, wouldn't be taking Max anywhere anytime soon.

Ultimately, what Steve felt was that he was half gone, numb, and everything left over was a shell. Even his parents had noticed and suspiciously never commented on Billy's quick departure. His mother chided him, saying he would make another friend and it was for the best--Billy was a troubled boy, with a troubled past, and Steve had his future ahead of him. His father hadn't said much of anything, but both of them had the decency to look at least a little regretful when they left him that morning. His mother gave him the number of the hotel they would be at three times before she placed a kiss on his

forehead. Steve couldn't recall the last time she did that.

No, the one who was worried was Dustin. Not about Billy necessarily, but for Steve. "She's only gonna break your heart and you're way too young for that shit," Steve told him, and now he *looked* exactly what that was supposed to feel like.

Nancy's frown deepened and she pulled her hand back. She thought for a moment, going over the events of the last month. Her and Jonathan had been talking about it--about his disappearance *and* his dad's death. She hadn't wanted to think negatively, to think that something more was happening, but her stomach kept turning and as she watched Steve, she couldn't keep her mouth shut.

"Don't... don't you think it's weird that Neil died *and* Billy disappeared around the same time?" She asked as she wrapped her hand around her coke. She ran her thumb over the condensation. "I mean. I don't want to... think that anything more is going on than what is--is *logical* --but..." She trailed off and chewed at her lip again. "You said he left a note, right? Have you talked with Max about it? I mean, *really* looked at it make sure he's the one who wrote it?"

She hated to insinuate that anything else was going on, to give Steve that possible hope that Billy might have not left him, but it seemed weird to her. It seemed... convenient.

Neil's body had been found in the bottom of the quarry, along with his truck. Supposedly, his blood alcohol level had been four times the legal limit and Steve was dimly aware of the fact that Billy informed Steve that sometimes his father drank to excess. Perhaps some strange part of Neil couldn't cope with the situation. At least, Steve wanted to believe that, but he wasn't sure Billy would. He wondered if Billy knew that his father was dead. Even if he went off and joined the military, wouldn't somebody tell him about that? Give him some sort of leave to attend the funeral, even as a new recruit? Steve didn't know and it was just one of a million questions constantly nagging at his mind.

"I don't know," came Steve's flippant reply. He picked up the fry Nancy threw at him and dropped it on the ground. "Max never said it wasn't his handwriting." Of course it was weird, the whole thing was

fucking weird. But what was Steve going to do? Contact a nearby naval base and ask if they'd seen his runaway ex-boyfriend, ex-whatever? "There's nothing to say, Nance. He's gone. Why do you even care? It's not like you liked him." It was an easy jab, even if there was no malice in his voice when he said it. If anything he just blinked at her and could see Byers bristle to her right.

Nancy tensed at the remark and tried to breathe through it. *Damn it, Steve*. She would have slapped him, but they were in the middle of the damned cafeteria. She would, later, for sure. "Because even though I didn't like him, I *watched* how he looked at you, asshole." She spat, "He was enamored by you. He looked at you the way Lucas looks at his sister." She threw her hands in the air and got up from the table. She grabbed her lunch and glared at Steve.

"But sure. Go ahead and assume when this place is full of fucked up secrets and lies. It isn't weird at all that Billy, who stumbled into all of this shit with us, suddenly disappears after his dad dies. No. Not at all." She clenched her jaw and then sighed, slowly sinking back down into her seat. She couldn't leave Steve. She couldn't do it to him--not with the way he looked. "Look. Just... look at it again, okay? I just... Steve, I don't have a great feeling about his." She dropped her eyes to her hands and frowned.

Steve's eyes were wide at his looked at her and his heart stuttered in his chest. They had never discussed this, Steve had never officially gotten up the nerve to talk to her about it, ask her opinion, but of course she knew. Billy told him that she knew. "Nance, I--" Steve swallowed and glanced at Jonathan. Of the three of them, Steve was used to being the third wheel now, but knowing Nancy, any theories she may or may not have had were shared between her and Byers.

He wasn't even sure what he wanted to say to her, this certainly wasn't how Steve planned on talking about it. His eyes filled with tears and he quickly turned his head to the side, focused on the wall there as he clenched his jaw, unwilling to cry in the middle of the fucking cafeteria.

He didn't look back at her or Jonathan, and Steve's voice softly wavered, "I've looked at it a thousand times, Nancy. What the fuck do you want me to do?"

Nancy's heart constricted as she watched Steve look away and she could hear the tears in his voice, the frustration. She reached over again and took his hand. She squeezed it gently and leaned over. "Look at the wording, Steve. You spent all that time with him, right? Look at the way it's written. Read it in *his* voice. Imagine *him* saying it, and then figure out if it sounds like something he'd say. Don't just pretend it's him. Force *him* to say it. If you can't, *he didn't write it*."

She squeezed his hand again. "Hell, get Max involved. She could help, too. I don't know him at all, Steve, but I saw what was going on between you two. I think... you need to go do this. It's already been a week..." A week had been too long for Barb, and she knew that Steve would understand that that's what she was saying. If they didn't figure it out, it may be too late.

Steve didn't look Jonathan's way when he took her hand then, squeezing it tightly. He was fairly sure Byers wasn't worried about him, especially not now. "Okay, okay I'll do that...I need to pick up your brother and the rest of the kids. Max, too." Steve was sure the kids thought they could cheer him up, drag him into their game and help him forget about his problems for a couple hours.

He did look at Jonathan then before he flicked his gaze back to Nancy. He was sure that when Jonathan and Nancy first got together, Byers had been worried, seriously worried Steve was going to pull some sort of stunt or at the very last make some sort of last ditch effort to win Nancy back. And then Steve didn't. He just didn't. He meant what he said, but Steve understood. Nancy and he crumbled apart. It happened, but it didn't mean he didn't care about her.

Even still, Steve felt like he owed Jonathan some sort of strange apology, that he never really had to worry about Steve like that. And as for Nancy...he didn't know what she thought. "I....I wanted to tell you." Steve said it softly, because at one point they really had told each other so much, and even this felt like yet another betrayal. Just like not telling her about the nightmares, or the bats, something Steve just couldn't figure out what to say to her.

Nancy smiled when Steve squeezed her hand back. It eased a lot of worries in her, a lot of pain that she had been carrying since their break up. She relaxed into her seat and shook her head. "I'm not

worried about it, Steve. I'm worried about what's going on with this town again." She squeezed Steve's hand again before pulling back. Her eyes were bright again, her lips curling into a small smile. "Take care of those brats, but try to get to the bottom of that note. It's your only clue, and really? You're smarter than you think or give yourself credit for."

Although, Nancy was concerned. If something more was going on, what could they possibly do to fix it? *Again* ? Maybe she was out of her mind and paranoid, but this just didn't add up--not after everything that had happened in this crazy ass town.

Steve gave her a soft, sad smile before he withdrew his hand. It was easy to think that it was more of the Upside-Down, after everything that they had been through, but it terrified Steve to wonder if that wasn't true. He knew he had been pushing Billy, wanted a lot more than Billy was ready for. So while part of him hoped Billy would just come back to him, or somehow he could get him back, it just might not be true.

"Thanks Nancy, uhh, Jonathan." Steve didn't call him Byers as he rose after a moment and threw away his basically uneaten lunch, pondered her words. The day was mostly a blur. Senior year was generally a breeze and Steve barely paid attention on the best of days anymore, certainly not unless he actually cared about the material, and now he had more important things on his mind.

When he finally got behind the wheel of his car, he felt dead on his feet. He grabbed some black coffee at a gas station on the way to Dustin's. It tasted like shit and he didn't add any cream or sugar like he normally did. Steve settled back into the seat and didn't lay on the horn. He just sat there for several long moments, his eyes weighted down, before he heard the door open and shut, causing him to jerk awake in his seat.

"You know, Steve, I'd rather not *die* today," Dustin told him, but his voice was quiet. He had watched Steve fall apart gradually over the week. It worried him. All he wanted to do was wrap a blanket around Steve and force him to sleep, like his mother used to help him do whenever he wasn't feeling well. "You're not gonna fall asleep behind the wheel, are you, my man? 'Cause I can totally ride my bike if

that's the case."

For the sake of time, the kids had all met at Dustin's. It was easier that way, especially given Steve's recent bout of depression. They didn't want to push more than they already did about Billy (questions upon questions until Steve snapped at them and they all stayed quiet after that). The other kids filed in after Dustin, squeezing into the BMW and buckling up.

They had all been weary of talking too loud or too much around Steve since Billy had disappeared--everyone but Max.

"Have you heard anything, Steve?" Max leaned forward in her seat and gripped her bag. Her eyes were on the back of Steve's head. She had asked. Every single day. Obviously, she hoped that this would change, that Steve *would* have heard something, and now everything was okay. She didn't want to give up hope.

Billy wouldn't just *abandon* her like that. She refused to believe it.

Steve shot Dustin a little annoyed look and made sure to take a large gulp of his terrible coffee as he stared at the kid. It burned his tongue and throat, but he didn't really care. Once he swallowed though and Dustin looked away, visibly upset, he felt a sharp pang of guilt as he reached over and gently rubbed his head with his knuckles.

He started the car once Max began her daily interrogation, and the normally noisy car was silent. "No, Max, I haven't heard anything." he thought back to what Nancy said, ask for her opinion on the matter. Today El was in the car with them, pressed a little too close to Mike, who she kept peering at under her lashes. Steve had only started to get to know her, but he had known for a long time what she was capable of.

But the idea of asking a little girl to find his boyfriend, of putting her through that and dealing with all the gate shit...it was cruel. "Nancy said we should look at it again, or something." He hadn't been lying--he probably had looked at it a thousand times by now. Each time resulted in him crying himself into exhaustion, humiliation, and anger, so he wasn't sure how another look would make a difference.

Max deflated into her seat and her shoulders sagged. She picked at the loose strands on her backpack and frowned. "Why do we need to look at it again? We've read it so much that I'm pretty sure we've memorized it by now." She huffed and wrapped her arms around her midsection, her eyes set on her knees. She didn't want to cry in front of the others, but her eyes became glassy, anyway.

Dustin frowned in the front and sank low in the seat. He hated seeing Max like this. She had been quiet, *withdrawn*, since this whole thing started. No matter what the Party said to her, there was a perpetual cloud that hung over her head and kept her from truly engaging with them. "We could all look at it," he suggested. "I mean... if you want, Steve." He looked out the window and shrugged. "He started kinda playing the game with us, and we're smart, heck, El is a *genius*." He ignored the cries of protest from the other boys and looked at Steve. "We could all get a chance to pick it apart. If you think it'll help."

Steve groaned loudly and held back the urge to hit his head on the steering wheel. It was terrible because it was a good idea, a really good idea, and Steve knew it. There was still the matter of having a bunch of kids on the verge of puberty read the goodbye letter from Billy. But then again, Steve was running low on ideas and everything was tearing him up inside. What was a little more humiliation on this trash fire?

Steve nodded and signed, "Fine, more heads and all that." It wasn't like Steve could even concentrate anymore, the lack of sleep and the stress sometimes was so fucking stifling it felt like he couldn't breathe. Based on all the things the kids were carrying, they planned to spend the night at Steve's. He honestly didn't mind, in fact the company would probably do him some good. "I'm just gonna order a couple pizzas or something--maybe a Hawaiian." Steve said with a pointed look in his rearview at Max. Steve wasn't sure the kids could help this situation, but he was grateful for them nevertheless.

Max glared at Steve in the rearview mirror and stuck her tongue out. At least it got a reaction out of her. She slumped back into the seat, though, and was quiet the rest of the ride to the house. The others chattered on, and she couldn't help but feel like El was watching her or Steve at random points in the ride. She gripped her bag as the others started to pile out of the car and felt her chest constrict.

If she was honest with herself, Max didn't want to read the letter again. Every time she read it, she felt betrayed because Billy had written *Steve* a letter, but not her. She had bitten back tears and then cried on her own. She couldn't let the others see that. She trudged out of the car and shut the door.

Now all these other people get to see the letter, get to see that Steve got one and she didn't. She frowned and walked toward the front door. She hadn't voiced her distress to Steve. Couldn't, with how he *wasn't* dealing. She tightened her grip on her bag.

Steve waited there for Max as the kids headed inside. He paused before he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, not understanding what she was thinking or feeling precisely, but he was still there for her. The look on her face when Steve told her that Billy was gone, that he wouldn't take her that weekend in Chicago...it stuck with him, horrified him. It seemed implausible really, that Billy would do that. No matter what was going on between him and Billy, Billy genuinely loved and cared for his sister.

"We'll figure it out, brat," was all Steve said, all he could say. He was sure she also didn't want to consider the possibility that Billy had just abandoned the both of them, especially after losing Neil. Aside from what happened between Billy and Neil, she had some sort of relationship with him, and the funeral was coming up soon. Steve was sure that with Neil's dead, Susan would get custody rather quickly of Max. He had a lot of mixed feelings about that.

"That's easy for you to say," Max mumbled, "at least he *gave* you a letter, Steve." She shrugged out of his arm and then ran after the other kids as they set up their things in the living room. She was trying not to cry, to give away how upset she was, but it was hard. After she dropped her bag, she turned and made her way to the bathroom. The door closed with a soft click and that was when she let the tears slip down her cheeks. She wiped her sweater over her cheeks and swallowed down the small noises she wanted to make.

Dustin glanced up from the game and frowned. His eyes flickered to Steve and then to the others. Mike shrugged, of course, because he still had a thing about Max. Lucas had already started to get up to go after her, but Dustin grabbed his arm.

"I think she needs a minute, dude," Dustin mumbled and plopped down onto the couch. "So, Steve. Where's this letter?"

Steve frowned, maybe this whole thing was a really bad idea. The last thing he wanted to do was make Max feel worse. "I'll get it..." Steve went up to his room, grabbed it from the drawer of his nightstand. He read the same thing every night, over and over again.

He hadn't stopped to think about that though, that Billy hadn't left Max a letter. It was...really strange. They weren't as close as most siblings in the traditional sense, but after everything they went through....didn't Billy owe her something?

Steve went slowly back downstairs, the kids were so subdued compared to usual and he forced himself to put on a little smile, flopped back on his couch like he normally did. Moping around by himself was one thing, worrying the kids was another.

Dustin perked up as Steve walked down the stairs again and glanced at the piece of paper. He took it out of Steve's hand and began to read it over. His brows furrowed as he did and he huffed. "This is all he wrote? After everything? Just *this*?" He waved the note in front of Steve's face just as Max walked out of the bathroom.

"Hey, Max!" Dustin leaned over and handed the letter to Lucas, who raised an eyebrow at him. "Was Billy like--REALLY gay or just a little gay?"

Max sputtered and stared at Dustin, her eyes wide with disbelief. "What?"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Was Billy *gay* or *really gay*."

"Oh my god," Max snorted as she wandered over to the couch and slumped down next to Lucas. "He never brought girls around, if that's what you're asking. And I mean--that's... why we left Cali. His dad found him with another boy."

"And then he was with Steve," Dustin nodded and Max glared at him.

"So?"

“He’s gay !” Dustin said it dramatically, as if it made *all the sense* . Lucas shook his head and handed the letter back to Steve.

“I don’t get why that’s important here,” Lucas crossed his arms over his chest.

Steve sat on the couch and groaned, as soon as Dustin started speaking he leaned forward, with his elbows resting on his knees. He covered his face in his hands and kept shaking his head, this was the worst goddamn idea ever. His voice was a little high, a little on edge, “HENDERSON, can you *not* keep saying that shit?” If anything, Billy might find the whole situation amusing, and if not, he would for sure find Steve’s mortification highly amusing.

They just talked about it so casually that Steve was sure that he would happily welcome Billy coming home and knocking him the fuck out right now. “You don’t just--talk about other people’s business like that!”

Dustin sighed and slapped his hand over his face. “He’s basically saying in the note that he wants a girl with him.” He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Steve. “He said he’d have a ‘gal’ with him.”

Max blinked and frowned. “He never called girls gals. He called them cows and bitches.”

“Exactly! If he was...” Dustin looked at Steve and shrugged. “If he is *that way* , then why would he talk about wanting a ‘gal’?”

“Steve...” Max reached out and snatched the letter. She reread it and then climbed onto the couch to sit next to Steve. “What do you think? I mean, he didn’t... he didn’t even *leave* me a letter.” She hated that tears were burning her eyes again, and she avoided everyone’s eyes by picking at her sweater.

It’s not like Billy constantly referred to girls like that, and it was more like when he was feeling like an asshole, so to hear the kids discuss him so negatively made Steve uncomfortable. But when they pointed it out, it did seem...well strange.

It was a big point of contention between them. Steve still liked girls. Billy did not. Never had. If he had, his conflicts with his father would have been a lot better and he was sure Billy would have quickly gravitated towards that aspect of himself.

When Max came over to him, he pulled her down close to him. His own body blocked hers slightly so the other kids couldn't see her face, even if he was sure they were astute enough to know she was crying. "You know he loved you, Max, he would have--he would have left you a letter." And once it was out there, it felt authentic. Only Steve knew just how deep Billy's self loathing went, his desire to be different. But his desire to be a decent brother to Max never faltered, especially after she saved him from Neil.

"But if that's true, what happened to him?" Max wiped her cheeks with her sweater again as the other kids looked at each other. It wasn't like they had forgotten about the people who went after El: the vans, the men and the epic way El had dealt with them. Except, Billy didn't have any powers. He didn't have any way of fighting off men like that, and while he was generally a good fighter, those vans didn't just come with one person in them.

Steve hadn't told Max about Billy's run in with the government. He had worried about her reaction, and Billy had insisted that he would toe the line. He wouldn't push it and he wouldn't do shit to piss them off. He had gone back to school, taken care of Max, and slowly began to open up more to Steve (and vice versa).

"You don't think..." Lucas glanced at El and then at the Party. "That place was shut down after Nancy and Jonathan blew the top off."

"I haven't seen any creepy vans," Dustin offered. "But those things were like cockroaches."

"You mean the guys you told me were after El?" Max frowned. "What would they even want with someone like Billy?"

"That's IF they have him," Lucas reminded them.

This wasn't something Steve wanted to bring up, after all, they were just *kids*. Even if they knew everything, Steve felt like the best way

for them to move on with their lives was to actually move on. He didn't try to be like his parents, sweep things under the rug, but the little brats couldn't obsess over this shit all the time. Steve watched Mike throw a worried glance over to Will, who seemed lost in thought. Maybe Mike thought the same thing that Steve did, how much was too much before somebody broke?

Hell, Steve knew he was at his limit. He basically ran on coffee and excess energy, and he had for some time, but now it was even less sleep than before, and it was *noticeable* .

It was just that Steve was also at a loss. The more the kids talked about it, the stranger it seemed. Steve was just in this spiral of self-loathing that he had been the one to push Billy away, finally break their tentative relationship. But if there was even a possibility that Billy was in danger, or hurt, and he didn't do his best, that would kill Steve.

His voice was soft, hesitant, and he glanced at Max once, "They talked to him, the guys from the lab or the government or something. When he--" Well shit, only Max knew about that. Steve cleared his throat, "When he found the demodog on the bus, they talked to him."

The kids, the whole lot of them, froze when Steve mentioned that *someone* had shown up and talked to Billy. They all looked at him quizzically before every single one of them tried to speak.

"No one *told* us!"

"Wait--Steve, he *knew* -"

"That makes this so much *worse* -"

"What the hell, Steve!"

"That would have been *better* to know, even without the letter!"

It felt like total chaos, the kids in an uproar and the game in front of them completely forgotten about. Finally, Dustin whistled, loud and sharp, and the talking calmed just enough so Steve's ears weren't ringing.

“Stop--damn!” Dustin huffed and looked back at Steve and Max. Max had paled and was staring at her legs, her mind obviously running with whatever sort of horror that Billy could have gotten himself into. “Okay, so let’s just hypothesize that he *did* get taken. What now?”

Steve held his head in his hands, the noise was just too much for him. He knew they were going to freak out, and he didn’t really blame them, he just couldn’t take all the noise. He groaned, his brow furrowed.

“It’s not--! Look, what they told him was to just stay in line. Just because he didn’t sign anything like the rest of us and he just--found it.” Steve wasn’t about to disclose that Max had told Billy. Hell, even Billy never directly told Steve that. He just put it together from some of their hushed whispers, words that maybe Billy didn’t feel comfortable asking Steve directly. And he wasn’t about to tell Max about the brutal way Billy was spoken to either, with the gun. None of them needed to know that information. Max didn’t need to have those thoughts, not right now.

Steve leaned back on the couch and looked at the ceiling, tried to think. “So even if they did take him, and that’s a *big if*, why? Billy didn’t do anything and he wasn’t going to say or do anything.” Not that Billy had a stake in publicly revealing all this, but Billy also knew that Steve would have freaked out if he had broken any story.

After so long of being quiet, Will finally spoke up. It was soft, but there was a layer of concern and another layer of familiar fear in his voice.

“Billy... doesn’t have family,” Will pointed out, his eyes flickering to Steve. Max opened her mouth, but he shook his head. “Not like that, Max. You’re staying with Hopper, right? Billy is staying here, but you told us that the court sort of let him decide, gave him free reign? So.. he has no ties. No one would technically miss him, right? Like, report it?”

Max’s heart picked up as she thought about Neil and Susan. No, they wouldn’t have cared. Even if Neil hadn’t ‘drowned’ in the lake, he would have thought this was a good thing. Going to military school

was right down his alley. Her eyes stayed on Will as she thought, and she was so lost in those thoughts that she missed the curse coming from Dustin.

Steve jerked a little and fought the urge to yell at Dustin, more like cursing back at him. He just felt so fucking dizzy and confused himself, and everything was just so muddled, he was struggling to catch up.

Billy didn't have anybody but Max and Steve, and neither one could claim him, not like a parent could anyway. But even still, the why plagued Steve. Billy towed the line. Just taking him because he happened to piss these guys off? It didn't make sense, it was still risky--even with no family.

He felt Max pressed at his side and he slung an arm around her. She may have had it worse than Steve. They had such a complicated relationship but for them to make so much progress and Billy to just be gone...she didn't deserve that either.

Dustin huffed. "I guess that leaves us with a big question, then: what the fuck do we do now?" He ignored Steve's response to his cussing and looked at his friends. He was determined because this was Steve's... boyfriend? He wasn't even sure at this point, but Steve was completely wrecked with Billy's absence. It was clear that Billy meant something to him, and if they could do something to fix it? He was determined.

"We look for him," Max finally piped up from beside Steve, her eyes red-rimmed but her lips set in determination. "We have to look for him. Right, Steve?" She looked over to him and her eyes narrowed, as if daring him to say no. For a moment, her voice and the obvious threat was so like Billy that it was almost comical--if only the situation had been different.

Steve gave her a soft smile and rubbed her head gently, similar to a couple times he had seen Billy do it. "Yeah, of course we're going to look for him, Max." He just really didn't know how to start or what to do--if Billy was somehow captured by those men, it's not like they could just storm the castle like in their little game. All of the little shits could get hurt, Steve could get hurt, Billy could get hurt.

El's voice was quiet but firm, and it cut through all of them, "I can help. Friends help friends, right?" She glanced over at Mike who smiled and nodded. El smiled back but then Steve's rose up.

"No. I want to find him, just as much as--" Steve glanced back at Max. "It's dangerous for her, really dangerous, and not just because of them. The gate is **closed** , and we don't know what will happen if she--!"

"If it's just enough to see where Billy is, it wouldn't hurt, right?" Dustin frowned and ignored the glare shot at him from Mike. "I mean. We just need to know where he is, right? If he's really off at the military or near us? We can just get *that much* and then... then, if he isn't in military school or whatever, we can get Hopper?" He nodded.

Max had looked at El, surprise written over her face. She felt a small bit of hope fill her and she almost got up to hug El. She stayed put, though, her breath shaky. "Can you...? Please, I really... I want to know where he is. Please, if it's only..." Just to make sure he was at least okay, even if it *would* piss her off that he left without any damned warning. She'd have to kick his ass later. But if he was in trouble? Then they could get help.

It was all up to El, then, whether or not she decided to look for Billy, to see if she could pinpoint where the teenager was. Max waited with baited breath, her fingers curled tightly into her jeans and her eyes uncharacteristically wide. Dustin was still ignoring Mike's glare and the way his hand had settled on El's arm.

Steve closed his eyes tightly. He knew what he felt for Billy. He had known it for some time now, and he fucking missed him. All he wanted was Billy beside him, touching him, and being his softer asshole self that Steve was used to. But no matter what happened, the answer was going to be terrible. Either Billy left of his own free will or he was taken. And if he was taken, Steve already knew that he would fight to save him, even if there was nothing he could really do, even if he might get really hurt himself.

He wanted it so badly, his stomach clenched in knots, as he looked at El. She was just so small. It was so unfair and cruel to ask this of her,

to ask her to risk her life again, and now for anybody she didn't even really know. If Steve had nightmares, what were her dreams like? Living under constant fear that the other shoe was going to drop, that the gate would open, that everything and everyone she finally found would be taken from her, *again* .

She fixed her gaze on him and Steve swallowed. She was so powerful and yet had this gentle air about her. It was different from the other kids; otherworldly was the only way to describe it. El looked at Steve and Max, before she looked back at Mike.

Mike was transfixed, biting his lower lip. They all knew it was a grave risk. El just smiled at him softly and squeezed Mike's hand before she looked back at Steve and Max. She gave a sort of helpless shrug, as if she really didn't have a choice, because she always knew what she was going to do.

"Friends help friends."

~*~

Billy was looking down at Steve, sprawled out on the bed, still fully clothed. Those big, ridiculously brown eyes were watching him, and those lips were curled into a smile. Steve had said something stupid, something outlandish, and Billy laughed. He reached down to tuck some of that hair out of Steve's face, pushing it away so he could get a better look at him.

Watching Steve warmed his body, warmed his soul in a way that it hadn't been since before his mother died. He leaned down and pressed his lips over Steve's, breathed in him in, tasted him, and Steve was arching into him, his hands on Billy's shoulders, holding onto him as if he were his lifeline. Before Billy could pull away, Steve was mumbling against him, saying something. He couldn't make it out, so he sat up more and looked down at him again.

"What was that, pretty boy?" Billy mused, running a thumb over

Steve's lower lip. When Steve parted his lips to talk, nothing came out. Instead, there was static, and Billy's confusion was like a blast of cold air over his body.

Billy jerked himself awake. His entire body was sweating and he was cold, but there was a firm, warm hand on his shoulder. He looked up and felt something break inside of him as the man nodded. It was time again. He had to try again. Tears sprang to his eyes and he almost begged to not go, to not be put through that again. Please, just let him *dream*. Let him be with Steve there, at least.

There was no reprieve, though, especially considering what had happened since the first experiment. Billy had mended enough to function, his body healing at a pace that shouldn't be possible. It left jagged, shiny scars, but he still healed. It was as if whatever was put inside of him first, that bone-chilling cold, used itself to heal what was broken so that it could survive inside of him. But it had left Billy exhausted enough that he had slept for almost a day before they pulled him awake again.

The man became impatient with him. They always did, especially when Billy lost himself in his thoughts. The hand became firmer and then jerked him up and out of the bed. He stumbled and grabbed hold of the guy's arm to straighten himself. He was at least clothed this time, covered in what had to be a hospital gown.

At this point, Billy didn't even fight as he was pushed out of the room and directed down the hall, toward that fucking room again. He felt himself getting dizzy as he walked. No matter how many times they tried, he never got it right. Brenner was an idiot to think this would work. He wasn't fucking special, no matter what the old bastard believed. He slumped as the door opened and that same man stood with a gentle smile on his face.

Billy wanted to kill him.

It was clear that they wanted him to connect with the Upside-Down, and it was strange because it wasn't as if Billy couldn't feel that something was there. *Something* was clearly there. And the more he healed, the stronger he could feel it, but that didn't mean he could do it the same way that they clearly wanted.

At least when he dreamed, he was away from there. Usually with Steve, but sometimes Max, enjoying each other's companies. Steve kissed him and held him, told him it would be alright, and when he woke up--sometimes he thought that might be true.

Until they started to break him, literally break him.

Usually it was just his bones, slow and methodical. They often started with his fingers or toes and worked their way up. They recorded how long it took him to recover, to heal. The only comfort was that the more they did it, the less it physically hurt, but of course it still felt like the nerves were dying from the inside out. Like Billy was dying from the inside out.

Brenner looked his own version of warm at the blonde. "Hello, Billy, are you ready to try again today?"

Maybe if he went inside, he could sleep there, be back with Steve on his bed, rolling around together.

It was a small hope in all of this. The more Billy spent passed out, the more he was allowed to simply leave this place. Even after they had gotten to his femur, he hadn't lost consciousness. Healing had taken longer from that. Instead of hours, it took a day. The bigger and stronger the bone, the longer it took, but the healing began to happen faster. The faster it happened, the more they broke, and Billy was becoming tired of hearing and feeling the bones break.

Again with the questions, as if he had a damned choice. He nodded, electing not to talk. That had been something else that had worn down over the week. Billy talked less and less because he screamed so much more and he was tired of hearing his own voice. He was tired of trying to reason with these people. Sometimes he'd beg, sure, especially when the pain got bad enough, but he did that unconsciously. He hadn't counted on that.

Getting suited up was the weirdest part. It was like being put into a space suit. It took forever, and by the time Billy was done, he was exhausted and wanted to sleep again. He had wondered if they kept his meals so little to see how far they could push him. Probably. Assholes.

Once Billy was in the water again, he forced his body to relax. He wasn't sure if they realized that he didn't give a shit about this, that he wasn't actually looking for the Upside Down (sometimes he felt it--maybe all the time, that cold from the first injection seeping deep within his bones). Instead, he closed his eyes and listened to the buzzing in his ears. That was all he knew in this place.

He didn't ever see anything, but it was peaceful, even if it was eerie. There were no commands. And being in there meant no broken bones, no torn skin, and a chance to be pain free. It was difficult to sleep though. Floating was such an unusual sensation--especially one to fall asleep in. It was only due to his exhaustion that it worked this time, though, and there was some relief when he was back in Steve's house, in the living room.

And then suddenly there was Steve, his form unmistakeable. He was cradling his head in his hands on the couch and that was Billy's first clue this wasn't normal. When he was with Steve, it was loving and kind. Steve held him sometimes as he cried, but Steve was there for Billy to rely on. Not this time; he wasn't dreaming this time. He couldn't be, right? But actually being there didn't make sense. How was that even possible?

Steve looked terrible, like he wanted to cry, like he hadn't slept in days. His hair wasn't really styled, as if he couldn't bother to make the effort. Steve hung his head and clenched his hair once, an expression Billy saw him do many times when he was frustrated and upset.

It was so hard for Billy to determine if this was real. It felt real, but his dreams were so vivid, too. They always were. Was this one? He stared at Steve, his eyes wide and shimmering with disbelief. Was this actually Steve? Was he in Steve's living room? Was this happening? He walked forward, but didn't really feel the carpet under his feet. In fact, as soon as he stepped forward, the image blipped and slipped away. The frustration made him want to scream. What kind of fucking *bullshit* was this!?

For a second, Billy felt like he was falling, his body unsteady. He faltered back and fell on his ass with a grunt. He closed his eyes tightly and whimpered, the only noise he could make before he

actually wanted to sob. What kind of trick was this? What was the tank doing to him? He sat up, his whole body shaking as he looked up again.

Steve was there again. He still looked the same, but now Billy felt like he could breathe him in. As if he were actually there. Like he was pressing his face into Steve's pillow. Tears began to stream down his cheeks and he *hated this* . He wanted out of the tank. He wanted out of this torture device because all it was doing was showing him exactly what he couldn't have.

" Let me out!" Billy screamed, his voice raw and rough, "Please, please, *just let me out ...*" He squeezed his eyes shut and stifled his desperate sobs. The image of Steve made his whole body ache more than those people could ever hurt him.

The image flickered for a moment and Max was at Steve's side, curled up against him and wiping at her face. Steve was holding it together for her, Billy could see that, but it was obvious that he was on the verge of breaking. What was this? He couldn't see this, he couldn't think about them like this. Was this happening right now in the real world? Had he done this to Steve and Max?

Steve's head was turned to the side, his jaw clenched. He had seen Steve cry several times, but always either on the cusp of a panic attack or coming away from them. Right now, Steve just looked raw, a pure emotion of quiet despair, and Billy couldn't stand it. This was too much. If Steve was panicking, it came from a place, a place Billy could help him crawl out of. But to just exist like this, to just be in *pain* --he couldn't see that.

Nobody took him out of the tank. They never did. He was in there as long as they said, as long as they wanted to use him as a pet. There was another flicker and Steve was holding onto Max, but he could see the other kids there. Mike looked incredibly worried, and it wasn't something Billy was used to seeing. Lucas looked at Max, Dustin on Steve, and Will was suddenly then looking directly at him. He didn't say anything but his gaze was fixed on Billy, and there was a soft exhale behind him.

"There you are." It was Hopper's kid--the little girl. She gave him a

small, tight smile. "Billy."

Billy launched himself up when he saw Max, when he saw Steve *holding her*. He stumbled forward and then froze. The other kids were there. They were there and then, suddenly, that voice was pulling him. He looked over and stared at El. It was the first time someone had actually spoken *to* him instead of *at* him all week. He walked forward, but his legs only carried him so far. His knees buckled and he faltered in front of El.

"You can see me," Billy didn't remember, couldn't remember, the last time he had cried in front of a child. Hell, he had cried in front of Steve, but that had been it. Now? It didn't fucking matter. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he reached out, his hand trembling as he brushed a few of her curly locks away from her face.

Realization dawned on him, then. If this was real--if this what he thought he was, then Steve was real. Max was real. Her friends were here. His heart gave a sudden jump and it was the first time he hoped that they didn't pull the plug, didn't pull him out.

"Please help me," Billy's voice sounded so ragged, so tired. "Please. Brenner, he--please..." He let his arm drop. Instead, he wrapped his arms around his own waist and dug his nails into his skin. It burned. "I don't know how much more I can..." His eyes flickered from the small girl to Steve again and he hesitated. He was doing this so they wouldn't touch them. What would happen if the kids tried to save him? If Steve tried? He felt the boiling of fear and anger in him again--emotions he hadn't felt for a few days now.

Billy looked back to El and then closed his eyes. How could they help him? At this point, he almost didn't care. The broken bones? The cuts? He wanted out. "C-can you tell... Can you tell Steve that I love him?" Because who fucking knew how long he would last in this place.

El blinked, watched Billy a long time, and then frowned in confusion. Her voice was a little broken for a moment. "...Papa?" Billy wished he knew about her; clearly she knew about this place, about Brenner, about what was happening to him. But despite her being there, all Billy was was alone. And if he died in this place, if this was going to

be it, at least he was going to say that and maybe Steve wouldn't *look* like that, wouldn't *feel* like that.

She seemed rattled, clearly rattled, and there was obviously so much more that she was going to have to talk to the others about, but she couldn't stay much longer. She quickly turned her head to them, and Billy heard her say, "He said he loves you, Steve."

Billy watched Steve jerk his head up, his brown eyes blown wide as one tear rolled down his cheek, and then another. Steve searched her expression for a moment, as if she was going to change her mind, say something different--until Steve just broke. His brow was knitted as he sucked in a large breath before the tears steadily fell. He collapsed in on himself, covered his face with his hands and rapidly shook his head. His shoulders shook, informing Billy that Steve was sobbing.

Steve knew that he loved Billy. He just never expected to actually say it, and definitely never expected that Billy would say it back. Yet, he knew that was what he felt. When Billy called him some stupid nickname, took his breath away with his kisses, or when Billy was unbearably kind to him after a nightmare, he felt *love*. Somebody like Billy didn't have to put up with Steve. But he did. Because Billy loved him.

He cried harder and Max and Dustin seemed alarmed. Though Billy couldn't hear anything, he watched Dustin surge forward and grab onto Steve. Dustin hugged him around his shoulders and Billy felt that slow pull, signifying it was time to leave, time for him to be alone again. Steve was saying something. It looked like he was yelling something, and it was horribly painful for him. Steve yanked at his hair again as Dustin tried to grab his hands, hold him.

El turned to face Billy one more time, looked at Billy's wrecked expression, but her voice was clear and firm, "He said 'we're going to get you out.'" And then, a second later, all of them were gone and the only thing left was blackness.

22. Chapter 22

Summary for the Chapter:

Once again, torture separated is separated with a scene break, but it's in the first scene, so buyer beware.

Being snapped back into darkness, back into his own body, hurt. Not physically, no, but that had been real, right? It wasn't just a dream? He was sure it was real. He reeled, his mind spiraling as he tried to keep his body from burning. Then his eyes were open and he was in the tank again. He was awake and he jerked, beginning to struggle, despite the fact that it meant nothing.

"Let me out," Billy shouted it at first, his voice raw and his breathing frantic. "Let me out. Let me out." He squeezed his eyes shut and slumped. He had become so fucking weak since this whole thing started. He felt like his body had wasted away, even if he still had retained his muscles. He felt broken and exhausted and he *hated it*. It was worse than what Neil could have ever done to him.

"Please, Brenner," It was the first time Billy had said his name in a while, and he knew it fucking got the guy off. He knew he liked hearing Billy talk, even if it was just his name. Billy could tell it was a power play, and he normally fought against it. Not now. He just wanted out of his suit. He wanted to crawl under some blankets and forget how wrecked Steve looked, how his body shook when he sobbed into his arms.

The water drained from the tank slowly, and even though Billy was going to get out, each second felt more suffocating than the last. He told Steve and Steve had clearly--he clearly felt something back. Something like maybe he loved Billy, too. It wasn't something that Billy planned for. He never planned for any of this. He was just going to live his life until graduation, go back to California, and get away from Neil.

But then there was Steve Harrington at a stupid Halloween party. Under a shower spray with a look of frustration on his face. Pinned

under his body and Billy's fists. Laughing hysterically on his couch, his cheeks flushed. And his arms wrapped around Billy's shoulders as he moaned into his mouth, lost in Billy's hands.

The one thing that couldn't happen was Steve rescuing him from this place. Either Brenner and his goons would kill Steve, or....or maybe they would experiment on him, too. And then it would be Steve screaming in a chair while those assholes tore him apart.

Steve would die if he came for Billy. They were heavily armed and Steve was just a guy. This wasn't something he could solve like he did Neil via the bat, they would kill him first. And Billy couldn't be the cause of that. No matter what he was now, what they had turned him into, that would kill Billy.

Brenner quickly approached him. He knew that his heart rate spiked and his vitals changed. It was obvious that something happened and Brenner looked *eager*. "Tell me. Tell me what you saw, Billy."

Seeing Steve had put a little more fight in Billy, had put a resolve in him. He still felt stifled, even as one of the goons pulled the helmet off. He gasped in regular air and then dropped his head back. He laughed and it sounded hysterical. He continued to laugh until tears began to slip down his cheeks, and it wasn't just in the dream realm now. When his laughter finally died down, he tilted his head to the side to stare at Brenner.

"None of your fucking business," Billy hissed. Steve was *private*. Even if he had been dreaming, he would never let Brenner have that. Steve was his. Brenner could break his body and his mind over and over and over again until Billy felt nothing, but he wasn't allowed to have Steve. He wasn't allowed to take this from him.

Memories of Steve were sacred. He'd keep them tucked away in the parts of his mind that stayed quiet, stayed hidden, during the day. Only at night did he ever indulge. Only when his eyes slipped closed or he passed out.

Brenner sighed and a look of annoyance crossed his face; it was the first time he seemed frustrated with Billy. But then he smiled again, like all was forgiven. "It's alright, Billy, I understand. But if you made

contact with....that world, I have to know.” Truthfully, Billy didn’t know what that was. It certainly wasn’t the Upside Down.

“Please.” Brenner reached out and placed a hand on Billy’s shoulder softly, before he squeezed enough to make sure it hurt. “If you don’t tell me, I’m going to be forced to have to talk to you.” That meant more torture, more broken bones, but for Steve...that was worth it. Let them. It just meant that he would see Steve even sooner.

The way he looked when that little girl told Steve, and his frantic yelling, if Billy thought about it, he could hear him, conjure up that image with what she said. “*We’re going to get you out.*”

Billy’s mouth went dry as Brenner touched him, as he anchored his hand to his shoulder and squeezed. It didn’t hurt as much as it should, but that was beginning to happen more often now. He licked his lips and looked at Brenner through half-lidded eyes. There was defiance there again, a piece of Billy that slid back into place after he saw his sister, Steve, and the kids.

“Like I said, *Dr. Brenner*,” Billy murmured and he *knew* he was asking for it, but he couldn’t help the grin that slowly spread across his face. “It’s none of your. Fucking. Business.” He jerked back, easily pulling himself out of Brenner’s hold. The guy never held too hard, not during his warnings, anyway. Now? Billy knew he was in for it. He was in trouble, but no matter what they did, he’d keep his mouth shut and continue to play fucking dumb.

Brenner sighed again as his hand dropped to his side. “One day, Billy. One day, you’ll cooperate and see what we do here is so necessary to keep the world that you know safe for all the others. But that’s not today, is it, Billy?” Brenner stepped to the side and motioned with his hand as two other men grabbed Billy and shoved him along.

If Billy saw the little girl again, if he had more time, he would tell them not to bother. For their safety and because Billy was *different* now. When they strapped him down in a chair, it was hard to fathom why they bothered; he never fought back. Not anymore. His nerves were dying over and over again, and the pain they inflicted on him hurt less--until they increased the intensity of the torture. He wondered just how much he would change and for how long.

One of them pushed forward a small tray of tools, including a hammer. This was new. Probably because he had finally displeased them, was actively defiant. And of course, if before wasn't 'cruel,' what would this be like?

As Billy tilted his head to the side, distracted by the clattering of the tray, he smirked. Honestly? What was one more session? One more bout of pain that he was going to heal from? That was the first thing Brenner salivated over. Billy was able to heal. No matter what they did to him, he would be right as rain the next day.

"Don't you get tired of doing this?" Billy wondered out loud, although he knew that the guy probably wouldn't respond. "I mean. Beating on kids. Kinda... kinda a shit profession, you know?" He laughed then, but the earlier hysteria was gone. It just sounded empty now because he knew what he was in for. At least, this time, it looked like they were going to spice things up. Maybe it would knock him out longer this time around and he'd have some peace for a while.

The door silently opened and in stepped Dr. Brenner...followed by Thing Two. He smiled warmly at Billy, as if they were old friends and he approached him that way too. "Hey, Hargrove! Long time no see, hm?" He picked up the hammer from the tray and spun it by the handle between his fingers, twirling it casually with the ease somebody might do with a coin.

If it had been somebody else, anybody else, Billy wouldn't have been as worried, but this guy fucking hated him. The bastard was probably waiting for an opportunity like this.

He slammed the hammer down on the table, just to watch Billy jerk in the restraints as he grinned at him. "I heard a lot of interesting things about you, kid. Do you think...if you bled out, you'd just make more? There has to be an end to it, right? The healing, the recovery?"

Billy wished he didn't respond to the guy like he did. Images of a gun being pushed down his throat made him feel dizzy. He swallowed and felt part of his fight drain away, his fingers twitching and his wrists straining for a second against the restraints. His eyes flickered from Brenner to the other guy and his lips thinned.

“Do you have a name, or are you just going to be ‘goon number two’ for the rest of your life?” Billy managed to hiss out. His demeanor had changed, though, his muscles taut as he evaluated the hammer in the guy’s hand and the way Brenner was looking at them.

“And who the fuck knows. I’m not the fucking scientist here.”

“Do you know...” He took a seat on the table, faced Billy, as he pointedly ignored his question. “When I first saw your file, I thought, shitty little kid, right? Daddy beats on him. That I’m used to, but *you*, you’re smart. A smart queer kid, off fucking some rich little boy, and then you managed to wedge yourself down into some *deep* shit. You’re more than I gave you credit for. And now, the doctor thinks you’re special, and I suppose, well, you are now.”

He smiled and it was all teeth. Had he kidnapped kids in the past, too? Did he kidnap Hopper’s daughter? He clearly had no problem hurting people--abusing them to bend to his will, killing, if it was necessary. “You’re a fighter, kid, and I can appreciate that. But eventually--everybody breaks.” He lifted the hammer before it came down hard on Billy’s hand, still tied in the chair. It usually went numb, but now it soared in pain, his blood coming to life under his skin and screaming at Billy to do *something*.

Billy furrowed his brows before pain exploded into his arm. He tossed his head back and his torso twisted. He clipped his mouth shut, teeth biting down onto his lower lip as the burn coursed up his arm, rang in his ears, made him dizzy. He huffed for breath after the first few waves of pain rolled through him and then slumped. The most noise he made was a sharp whine.

It was difficult not to try to move his hand, his fingers. He knew they were broken, and it should have hurt more. Yet, the week of constant breaking gave him a tolerance that he was impressed with. Fuck, even Neil would have been impressed. He laughed at that, even as his body began to tremble. He knew what was coming, and here he was, fucking laughing because his dad would be *proud* that he could take getting hit by a damned hammer.

“Think this is funny, huh?” He grinned down at Billy and twirled the hammer again slowly. “Are you going to think this is so funny when I

smash your little sister's head in? And ram this up your boyfriend's ass? Maybe he'd like it." Brenner stiffened at the door, but didn't move towards them. After a beat, he quietly left the room, no doubt to still observe but... not interfere.

"Must be hard to believe. A little rich boy wanting a piece of trash like yourself. Guess you must have gave it to him good for him to forget about that stuck up broad and your daddy issues." He smirked, enjoyed this, enjoyed pushing Billy to take the bait. And Billy *knew* that. But hearing him talk about Max, about Steve...

The laughter died down immediately and a look of rage crossed over Billy's face. He stared at the guy, and it seemed like his words got to Billy more than the hammer did. More than breaking his bones or slicing him open. He began to jerk in his restraints, that same fire igniting behind his eyes from when they had first met at the quarry. His lips curled into a snarl and he jerked at his wrists, not caring if it caused pain in his broken hand.

"Shut up," Billy hissed out, fury making his voice breathy and strained. "Shut your fucking mouth. You have no idea what you're talking about." He twisted his arms, even if it didn't get him anywhere. "I'll fucking kill you." His head began to buzz, then, his body burning as he *felt* his bones begin to knit together under the skin of his fingers and hand. Blood began to slip out of his nose and down his cheek.

Apparently, Billy was driven closer to his power through physical *and* emotional distress. Anger being one of those. Billy was used to physical pain. He had lived with it all of his life, but he had only recently started to care, to *love* , and he would kill *anyone* who went near Steve or Max like that.

The guy roared with laughter, "You should see yourself! That was amazing! Just amazing!" Thing Two leaned out and rapidly swung the hammer on his arm several times to break it again. The bones started to heal before he even said anything, obviously fueled by Billy's anger. Billy was well aware they were being watched, recorded, analyzed to see and evaluate his responses. That's what these fuckers did. He was just a giant science experiment, and Steve was just somebody that they could use against him to provoke a

response.

Leaning forward, he began whispering low enough just for Billy to hear, wanting to rile him up. "You must have him wrapped tightly around your dick to give up that little piece of ass he had. Never would have thought he swung that way, but you kid, just a little too much, hm? I've met a couple fags just like you. A little too much of a show to ring true--guess your father knew that, hm? You still haven't even thanked me for that one." He chuckled and breathed into Billy's ear, "Maybe I'll get it from your little 'princess.' A hole's a hole, right?"

The rate at which his bones were healing after the hammer hit was almost as painful as the actual break. The bones were responding to his terror as it screamed through him. He couldn't stay silent anymore as the hammer came down on his arm and he cried out, twisted enough to almost pull his arm out of its socket. He panted and tried to ignore the tears that stung at his eyes. At this point, he could taste blood on his upper lip from his nose.

At least the hammer stopped, but it was just long enough for the guy to whisper in his ear, to send his mind reeling. His stomach clenched, his eyes snapped closed as he fought back the angry sobs that threatened to wreck him. He pushed his head back against the seat and wanted to kill the guy. He wanted to tear him open and fucking *bathe* in his blood.

It only took minutes for his arm to mend, for it to become completely normal. Billy was dizzy as a result, his eyes barely focusing as he opened them to look at the guy. He was far too close for Billy's comfort, and he whimpered in protest.

"Please stop," Billy swallowed and tilted his head to the other side, so his breath fanned over the guy's face. Maybe, if he got close, if the guy had a faggot this close, he'd stop. "Stop... *please*."

The guy pulled back just enough to search Billy's gaze, still grinning at him like the fucking Grim Reaper, "What? What is it, Billy? You'll do *anything* for me? What if you're not my type? What if I like a 'pretty boy'?"

Jesus , how long had they been watching them?

Billy stared at him and felt his skin chill over. His palms became sweaty and his heartbeat rung so loudly in his ears that it *hurt* . “I’ll do anything,” Billy blurted out and *hated himself* . He hated that he had such an obvious weakness. “I’ll do anything. Please, don’t touch him. Please, don’t touch him.” He repeated himself as if it would mean *anything* to the guy standing over him.

They were going to use this tactic more often. Billy saw that now, and it was going to force him to bend to their will, to do what they wanted. He dropped his head back and trembled, wished it could just be over. Whether it was this session or his fucking life, though? He wasn’t sure.

He grabbed Billy’s chin and smirked at him, pinching hard along his cheeks as he jerked his head. “Tell me, tell me who you don’t want me to touch? You don’t want me to fuck your little boyfriend on the floor? Maybe I can make him scream for you. Might be the last time he says your name while he’s getting fucked.”

It was hard to know if he would really do that, and Billy knew it was extreme and horrible, maybe far-fetched to most. But sometimes it didn’t matter when you hated something or someone that deeply, you were willing to destroy yourself just for the ability to hurt *them* . “Tell me who you’re begging me not to fuck.”

Billy sucked in a sharp breath as his cheeks were grabbed, as his head was jerked forward so that his eyes stayed on the man as he spoke. He was panting at this point, desperate to get out of the restraints, to have the power in his veins settled and not so wild. He felt it below his skin, thrumming, and with nothing to heal, it felt like it was burning him alive.

Tears pricked at his eyes and as soon as he blinked, they trailed down his temples and into his hair. “Steve,” Billy managed to grit out, his jaw clenched from the grip on him. He wanted to close his eyes, but he knew it was a bad idea. Instead, he stared at him. If the guy knew what he called Steve, knew his sister, he already knew his name. He was just fucking with his head, and it was *working* . “Steve. Steve Harrington. Please.”

And just like that, *Steve* was brought into his torture, tainted by this man. His memories damaged and Billy felt hollow. He slumped against the seat, aching deep within his chest. They had managed to curl their fingers around the last thing that had kept him sane--that kept him grounded.

He threw Billy's head back in disgust, his smirk gone, and the game was over. He knew it too, his affect was flat then, now that he knew Billy was broken. "Have you connected with the other dimension and seen anything unusual in the sensory deprivation tank?"

This is what it was all about, not Billy or Steve, but being their puppet to connect with that place. Being strong enough to connect with that place--so they could harness and use it for god knows what. They didn't really want to hurt Steve or Max, it was just a bargaining chip to get Billy to obey. Neil proved that--that they would kill to get what they wanted out of Billy, so it never seemed out of the realm of possibility that they would hurt Max or Steve. But that moment was just to break Billy. Some part of Billy knew that, and he still fell for it.

It was a show, a game, to push Billy into giving the information he refused to give up earlier.

Billy grunted as his head hit the seat. His body relaxed almost immediately. He *hated* being touched by the guy. He swallowed and shook his head. "I was dreaming about Steve." He admitted, which would certainly explain the hike in his heart rate. He shuddered and looked at the glass. He knew Brenner was there. He knew he was being watched.

"Please, can we stop?" Billy let his exhaustion seep through as he stared at the glass now, as if he could see through it. "Please. I didn't see anything, but I'll try hard tomorrow. Or later. I promise, I'll try." He would, too. He just wanted to sleep or eat or do something *normal*.

There was a moment of silence, but it was deafening to Billy. What he said was close enough to the truth for them to not pry, and Thing Two made no move toward him when there was a loud buzz, signaling the session was over. Thing Two threw him a smile,

promising more to come when he left the room. Billy didn't see Brenner again as he was untied from the chair.

Nobody told him he could stop for now, but it was heavily implied. They owned Billy, owned his body, mind, and now his heart. They would be able to easily break him, continuously threaten him so long as he had feelings for Steve. Two men hauled Billy up to his feet and dragged him back to his cell.

Perhaps they pitied him, since they set him on his bed instead of dumping him on his floor. Billy couldn't tell them about Hopper's kid, about what she could do; they would buy him dreaming about Steve--that was a plausible cover up for now. The only way to ensure Steve and Max were safe was to comply with their orders.

The bed wasn't so comfortable, but that didn't matter. Between the tank and that asshole, Billy felt exhaustion creeping into the edges of his vision. He felt boneless as he eased himself down onto the bed. Why had they chosen him, out of everyone in that damned town? Granted, he had a few guesses, but at this point? He didn't give a fuck. He just wanted to sleep. With a shaking hand Billy reached up and wiped away the drying blood on his face. He still felt hot just beneath his skin, as if whatever 'special' powers they had been so kind to ignite in him were irritated that it had nothing to heal, nothing to work on after Billy became riled up.

It's not like it mattered. Billy was sure he would die here. He had no idea how he had been pulled to El or the kids, or *Steve*, but they couldn't handle this place. After watching that asshole shoot Neil? Billy knew it was basically asking for death.

As sleep clawed at his mind, Billy continued to think about Steve--about his eyes, his hair, his lips, his smile, and his stupid, ridiculous, *beautiful* laughter.

~*~

Once Steve stopped crying, the kids were silent for a while. He felt guilty about it, and he was sure it disturbed them, Dustin and Max at

least, who remained close to him. Steve swiped at his face and tried to collect himself, felt the kids shift at his side.

It was unexpected, that's what did him in. That they found Billy, that he was in danger, that he *loved* Steve. Each of the kids heard El say that, and it was probably horribly confusing to them—except for Max, none of them knew what Billy was like when he was really raw. Billy seemed like somebody who would have a hard time loving another person, being loved, it took Steve a long time to see otherwise himself.

He sat forward, rested his elbows on his knees and held his head in thought. Steve said he would get him out, and even if Billy hated him, he couldn't just leave somebody in a place like that.

El was in a bit of a daze and when she came out of it, she sat down heavily, like all of her true years of age suddenly weighed down upon her. She sat there just like Steve, each of them unable to function for several moments and the others unsure of what to do to snap them out of it. She finally turned to look at Mike, tears glistened in her eyes, "Papa's alive."

"The guy who hurt you," Mike's frown deepened. He obviously wanted to make El feel better, but this was big news. *Bad news* . "Wait, Billy is with your dad?"

"What does that even mean?" Max had put her hand on Steve's wrist, clutched him, as she fought the panic in her gut. "What would he be doing to Billy?"

"El said there were other... kids," Dustin offered. "Do you think... do you think..."

"Kids," Lucas stressed, "Other kids. Billy is an adult, right? Well, he's not a kid." He could see how Max tensed, how the fear flushed her face.

"But if Will is right," Dustin cut in, furrowing his brows and squinting at the other kids. "If Billy doesn't have anyone to report him missing, wouldn't it be easier than kidnapping another kid?"

“El,” Max’s strained voice caught the kids’ attention and they all zeroed in on Max. “El, what’re they doing to Billy? How do we save him?”

Steve took it all in, struggled to think, struggled not to correct them that Billy and he were kids too—at least to most adults. It was hard for them to understand that at their age, and hell it was hard for Steve too. He had to be the adult.

“I don’t know what they’re doing exactly, but he said...” El looked over at Steve and Max, she was still learning the right things to say and not to say. She did her best to interact with the others, learn from how they talked to each other, but sometimes when she tried to talk, to explain something that she knew would make them uncomfortable, she often hesitated. But Max had asked her, and if she didn’t reply to Max, it would be lying, even if she didn’t say anything. “He said he didn’t know how much more he could take.”

It wasn’t difficult for all of them to think the same thing: torture. They all knew enough about that place and those people to assume that. Steve heard a soft sob to his side and turned his head, Max covered her head with her forearms but the sound was unmistakable. It set everybody on edge, Steve was on edge and he forced himself to stop as he exhaled shakily and gathered her in his arms.

“We are not—the only thing we are going to talk about is thinking of a way to get him out, is everybody clear? No more of this shit.” What was the point in discussing the possibilities, of Billy being tortured, of the only man El associated as her father, of bringing up what happened to El and that fucked up place? Everybody was going to fucking break if they kept talking like this, so Steve steeled himself for what needed to happen—getting Billy the fuck out of there.

“Okay, so, planning,” Dustin rubbed his hands together and sank off of the couch so he could fit into the circle of his friends on the floor. “I’m guessing he’s in the lab? The one that you and Hopper went to?” He nodded to El and hesitated. “Well. I think--shouldn’t we get Hopper, too? I mean, he’s the police, right? Having him will help.”

Max tilted her head up and wiped her cheeks on her sweater. She could do this. She could help plan, right? Sitting here and crying

wouldn't actually help at all. Her eyes fell to Dustin as Lucas piped up.

"He would be willing to help. What about Mrs. Byers?"

"I think my mom would be willing to help," Will nodded. Even though it hurt him to drag her into this sort of mess again, once she heard one of them was taken? She would storm down a place on her *own* .

"What about Nancy and Jonathan? They can go up against a demogorgon, they can go up against some guys, right?" Mike offered. "They're the ones who got them into trouble, anyway. I bet they'd help."

"All of that is great, but how do we even get close?" Max tugged at her sweater. "That place is probably crawling, right?"

Dustin nodded, "That's true. Steve... should we just wait until we talk to Hopper and see what he says? He's the one who can get in without too many questions, right? He could scout for us."

The truth was that Steve didn't want to involve any of them. Yes, they were all this very strange group, the Party, as the kids referred to it, but very few of them actually knew Billy. And nobody knew him well enough to want to risk their safety. And what about what Billy wanted? He would be furious with Steve for dragging Max into something like that, putting her life on the line. Hell, he might be mad with Steve for doing it himself. It was just that he could live with Billy being mad at him, but not with Billy being tortured by those fucking people and doing nothing about it.

Scouting didn't mean anything. Will might still see those people, but they weren't going to admit to taking Billy, and certainly not just lead them to where he was. They needed to know where Billy was first and then try to find a way into the lab.

"It doesn't matter how many people know--all of that is pointless without knowing where he is and then finding a way in to get him out." Steve replied, a little sternly. He didn't want to involve Nancy and Jonathan, Mrs. Byers. What could they all do, aside from feel

afraid and depressed that this was happening all over again? What they all needed was a sense of normalcy, and Nancy knowing how to use a gun wasn't going to help them stop a fucking government agency from torturing kids and young men.

"What about the tunnels?" Max asked suddenly, perking up on Steve's lap. Her eyes were red as she thought out loud, "The ones at Will's place, they were all over Hawkins, they have to be at the lab too, right?"

"They have to lead back to the lab," Dustin added, "I mean. If that's where all the demodogs were going, right? They were going to try to stop El from closing the gate. So it has to connect."

"Still, Steve is right," Lucas frowned. "If we don't even know where he is, how can we actually get to him? If the tunnels are there, how do we even know we're going the right direction?"

"Compass. Duh," Dustin made a face.

"It'll be guarded," Will shook his head. "Just like before, it'll be guarded."

"I can find him." El said softly, looking at all of them. "I can find him, Steve is my friend and Billy is his friend--so that means Billy is my friend too, right?" She looked at Mike and smiled at him, sought his approval even though he was clearly concerned. "Friends are supposed to help each other and keep each other safe. So I can do that."

Steve looked up at the ceiling and blinked, even as the kids started to excitedly chatter around him, bouncing ideas off each other. Using El's abilities was dangerous, easy, but dangerous. There was the gate, there was those men finding her, and god, there was the toll it had to take on her to constantly do this. But once the kids had an idea, getting them to stop talking was impossible. Not to mention that Max was no longer crying and Steve wasn't about to burst her bubble, not when she was so fragile.

After several minutes, Steve's voice cut above the noisy, half-shouted plans. "Tonight, we're just going to eat and sleep--enough of this

right now. We'll discuss it in the morning--with everybody, the rest of the Party." As loathe as Steve was to do that, the brats understood the importance of letting all the members contribute. It didn't stop them from debating things back and forth, but luckily food arrived soon and Steve wordlessly paid and watched them eat.

Steve barely touched his food, and instead set up the kids' sleeping bags along the great room floor when Dustin saddled up to him. Steve stopped unrolling a bag and rose, "Yeah?"

"You care a lot about him," it wasn't a question. Dustin watched him with a calculated gaze, his mouth set in a soft grin, even if it wasn't as bright as it normally was. "I can tell. We'll find him, you know. We'll get him back, and then we can go back to wondering if he'll kill one of us." He pushed Steve's arm gently.

"Or he'll keep your character alive in our game, like he's done for the past month," Dustin made a face. "Honestly, you can probably do better at that, Steve. It isn't *that* hard..." He was obviously trying to distract Steve, even if he knew it wasn't going to work. Steve looked too distraught earlier for it to be that easy.

Dustin reached out and curled his fingers into Steve's polo sleeve. He hesitated and then looked at him with all the determination in the world. "Just like we saved El. We'll save Billy."

Steve swallowed hard. Sometimes with the way that they spoke to one another, it was easy to forget that Dustin was just another kid. Truly, like his little brother. And the little curly-haired shit was trying to cheer him up, he could see that. Steve remembered Dustin trying to comfort him on the couch, unsure of himself, but distraught by Steve's tears and panicked yelling that they would free Billy.

Steve didn't say anything and just quickly pulled Dustin into a tight embrace. He felt Dustin's arms wrap around him and he rested his chin on the top of his head, looking out as Steve squeezed hard. One day, Dustin might even be taller than him.

"I know we will, I know. I'm okay, man." Steve softly said, gently patting him on the back. The last time he actually remotely held Dustin like this, they were about to be ripped apart by those

demodogs, and Steve had surprised himself with his own fierce protection of the kid. He wasn't surprised now.

After a few moments of standing like that, Dustin sniffled and pushed back. "Good. 'Cause we got shit to do." He huffed, daring Steve to say anything about his cussing by sending him a cheeky grin. "Starting tomorrow morning, though. I think we're all wiped out."

Dustin eased himself down onto the floor and looked around. Some of his friends were already passed out. Will was awake, gazing up at the ceiling, probably lost in his own thoughts. Max was curled on the couch, covered by a thin blanket, her hair absolutely everywhere. Mike and Eleven were lying next to each other, but the sleeping bags were separating them.

"We're all here for you," Dustin mumbled the last comment and then sank into his own sleeping bag. "Just... don't think you're alone. We're here, too." *Not just Billy* .

"No, I know, I know." Steve watched them all for several moments, felt that strong urge come over him again to keep them all safe. They were good kids. They would be good grown-ups too. He just had to make sure that happened, keep them all as safe as he possibly could in Hawkins. Steve approached Max slowly, could see that she was still awake, even with her eyes closed, her breathing gave her away.

Susan was left to her grief over Neil and Max was alone, truly alone without Billy. She would likely go back to live with her mother, but their relationship was different now. Steve bent over and kissed her forehead, whispered a good night to her. She was often with Billy, and thus with Steve by default. Steve was incredibly fond of her, she was a fucking fighter like Billy, and when she blinked her eyes up at him, he tucked her hair back and went silently up to his room.

The first thing he did was plug in the lights as he slowly undressed, wearing a little more clothes than normal due to the chilly weather and the kids being in the house. Steve didn't know why he was bothering though, he would barely sleep like the rest of this week.

He wasn't looking forward to tomorrow, telling Nancy and Hopper. He hated even having the kids involved, they just wormed their way

in like always and he was weak. Steve curled up under the sheets and turned, faced where Billy would be, should be. Billy loved him. He never expected that, and he hadn't said it back. Steve wasn't about to let Billy Hargrove die without knowing that Steve loved him.

Eventually exhaustion won out and Steve reached out, gripped what was usually Billy's pillow and brought it close to his body before he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

~*~

Before they had allowed Billy to sleep, he had gone through another session. Apparently, Brenner had been interested in how his emotional distress helped heal the damage. They had played with his emotions for almost a half an hour while breaking bone after bone before he gave out, before he couldn't respond anymore, and then Brenner called it quits. They couldn't risk desensitizing Billy to their threats and their words.

They had to be careful to keep Billy raw and open.

Billy hadn't bothered to touch the food tray they left on the floor of his cell. He pushed himself into the corner of the small bed, curled into the fetal position. His arms were tucked around his knees, preserving what little warmth his own body heat provided. He had no idea why they kept the room so fucking cold, but at least it allowed him to sleep.

The dream placed him in darkness. He wasn't sure what was going on, but the place felt familiar. It smelled familiar. His skin didn't crawl and as he stood, his body aching with exhaustion, his eyes flickered around to find something, anything, to tell him where he was. That was when he realized that the familiar smell, the familiar feeling across his skin was distinctly *Steve*.

"Steve...?" But how? Was he in the tank again? He was sleeping, wasn't he? Confusion made the space behind his eyes pulse as he walked forward. It wasn't until he actually found Steve that he was sure it was just a dream. He was probably imitating what the tank

did out of desperation of some normalcy. How fucking cruel.

Steve was lying in his bed, though, covered just to his waist with blankets. There was a light glow in his dream, and Billy figured it was those pretty lights Steve always had up.

“ Steve ...” As soon as he got close enough, Billy reached down, sliding his fingers through Steve’s hair. The strands didn’t move, though, as if Billy was a damned ghost. He wrapped his arms around his own waist and shuddered. “I miss you.”

It had to be a dream, of course. Steve was only like this in his dreams. Steve stirred and groaned softly on the bed, his eyes opened slowly as he looked up and saw Billy. Steve didn’t look how he normally did in Billy’s dreams, no, he looked done in like how he saw him earlier in the tank. Worried about Billy, no doubt. It hurt that he was the cause of that, and it looked even worse than when Steve’s parents had been here. Before Steve was exhausted, but now there was this edge of desperation there, painful and resonating.

Steve frowned a little, also thinking he was dreaming for a moment. His exhaustion blurred the lines between being dreaming and reality, and it was easy to drift off and confuse the two. He smiled for a moment and tears gathered in his eyes, “Billy...” He stretched for just a moment, tried to make himself comfortable for the blonde.

As soon as Steve said his name, Billy crumbled. He sank to the ground, his knees hitting first. He settled there and trembled as he looked at the bed, looked at Steve, and he wished this dream could be kinder. He wished he could touch Steve, but dreams never cooperated for him. This was the first one where Steve actually spoke to him, but now he looked just as wrecked as what Billy witnessed before.

“I’m sorry,” Billy blurted. His fingers dug into his sides as remorse coiled into his gut. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He wanted out of the lab. He wanted to be in Steve’s bed. He wanted to taste his lips and hear his soothing voice. He wanted *so much* . When he was dreaming like this, it was hard to deny that he wanted saved. When he was being tortured? When those men promised to do shit to Steve that made his vision bleed red? His resolve was final and he refused to let *anything*

happen to Steve.

But now? As he knelt next to the bed and trembled because he *ached* , and not necessarily from the physical strain? He just wanted Steve to find him, to save him. Why couldn't he just indulge here? He could, right? He could pretend here, as he slept, that he wasn't in that fucking place.

Slowly, Billy picked himself up from the floor. Brenner couldn't get him here. He wouldn't be able to find him. He settled on the bed, then, but there wasn't a dip or anything, as if Billy weighed absolutely nothing. He still scooted close to Steve, his heart hammering in his chest.

Steve swallowed, his heart racing when Billy fell and he closed his eyes for just a moment, shook his head quickly. He didn't want to think of Billy like that, in that place, Steve wanted *his* Billy: cocky, teasing, sensual, and so fucking beautiful. When he opened his eyes though, Billy was close to him again, and even in a dream, he couldn't just let Billy apologize for something like that.

Steve shook his head again, "No, no, it's not your fault, don't say that, please...I just...I miss you so fucking much...." A few tears ran down his cheeks before Steve wetly gasped in a quiet sob. His lower lip quivered and Steve bit down on it hard. "It's so stupid, but it's exactly like part of me is just gone, it's just--it's dead without you here...." Steve didn't normally discuss these things with Billy while he slept, opted for heated kisses and intense caresses when Billy took him, took him apart.

Billy watched Steve quietly. That fire that had been in his eyes was gone, snuffed out, and he just looked fucking tired. He looked away from Steve, into the darkness of the dream, and wondered how his brain managed to conjure up just the bed and Steve--with that yellow-white light from the lights. It was torture for him, but he wouldn't let the opportunity to talk to Steve slip through his fingers, even if it made him feel insane.

"I know what you mean," Billy curled his fingers against his legs. Leave it to his dream to let him walk around in his jeans and t-shirt again, even if he was sleeping in one of those dingy hospital gowns.

“I think they’ve beaten that out of me, though...” He tried to smile, but it fell immediately. He wasn’t bothering trying to cover anything up. It was a dream, so what did it matter?

“I was... I was able to keep them away from you for a while, though. Eventually, he took that, too.” Billy laced his fingers together and ran his thumb over his hand. He clearly couldn’t touch Steve, so he opted to touch his own skin, to keep himself grounded. It was nice to talk to someone, at least. Even if it was all in his damned head.

“Don’t say that-! Don’t you ever say that to me, I wouldn’t-!” Steve swallowed and quickly looked down at the bed. He couldn’t hear that about Billy, couldn’t hear that Billy was close to breaking. Maybe already broken.

Steve didn’t know what Billy meant. Maybe they wanted to take him in, too. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if he was close to Billy, though he couldn’t say that, he imagined Billy getting upset with him and that’s not what he wanted.

Steve’s voice wavered, “You said you loved me. Is that true?” Steve lifted his head and searched Billy’s face. Even in a dream, it was like he could tell if Billy was going to lie to him, would be able to tell by his expressions. Steve sat upright, his legs tucked under him and his hands clenched in the blankets.

Billy looked over, surprised by Steve’s response. His heart felt like it was breaking all over again and he clenched his jaw to keep himself from snapping back. There was no use, right? He didn’t want to upset Steve, even dream Steve. He tilted his head back and looked into the darkness of what he assumed was his head.

“Of course it’s true,” Billy finally looked over at Steve and wished he could touch him. He knew he couldn’t, though, and it tore him apart. “I do love you. I told El to tell you. I keep thinking they’re going to find something that will actually kill me. That I can’t... heal from, and I needed--I had to have--I needed...” Billy trailed off and then swallowed.

“You deserved to know. I wanted to go on that date with you. I didn’t expect that they’d... I expected to be left alone, yeah? I did what they

told me and they *still* took me.” Billy shrugged, then, as if it didn’t matter at this point. “Neil told me it was to fix me, you know? Maybe he was right. Can’t fuck up anymore if *I’m fucking dead* .”

“DON’T SAY THAT!” Steve screamed out. He screwed his eyes tightly closed as he reached up and grabbed his hair--tried to calm down--his breathing shaky. “Don’t fucking say that, I don’t wanna ever hear you fucking say that!” Steve let out a sob once before he got ahold of himself, looked back up at Billy, “I thought it was me-! I thought you left because of me! Because I’ve been fucked up and *pushing* and *pushing* you---! Fuck!”

It was infuriating, really, how much Steve thought this was all his fault. He had really been convinced that Billy left him, left Max, left Hawkins, all because Steve couldn’t handle his own shit. Steve grit his teeth, “Do you know how upset I’ve been! I thought the nightmares were bad before, but at least I fucking slept then! I look like hell, I’m scaring everybody, all because I can’t be away from you! Do you even know just how much *I fucking love you* , you asshole!” Steve panted a little. His head spun in this strange way, like he was actually yelling.

Billy jerked, almost flinching as Steve screamed. His shoulders slumped and his lips pursed as he listened to Steve. He swallowed down the urge to cry. He had done that so much. He cried until the sobs were dry and it was *painful* . He didn’t think he could do it anymore. His eyes flickered from his lap to Steve and he ached, again, to touch him.

“I would never leave you,” Billy offered quietly, “I wouldn’t... Neil followed me, Steve. From the school. I confronted him and he...” The gunshot had been so close, so fucking real. Billy had been sure he had been shot and just hadn’t realized it. “They shot him in front of me. I knew they’d... if I didn’t go with them, they’d go after you and Max next.” He pulled his knees up, his feet resting on the edge of the bed as he tucked his arms around his legs. He wasn’t sure if he would ever be able to just talk like this outside of his dreams, but it still felt *good* to let shit go.

“I love you, too, Steve. I do. That’s why I told El to tell you. And--and you don’t have to worry too much, you know. They did this--this

shit..." Billy laughed, but it was strained. Everything felt strained. "I can heal now, you know? Like. Super fucking fast. So maybe they won't be able to kill me. Not for lack of trying, I guess. They keep wanting me to open... something? To see something? Like that dog thing."

Steve's eyes were wide as he watched Billy. He seemed so different, so distraught, and Steve couldn't stand to see him like that. They all suspected that something else had gone on with Neil, but for him to be shot in front of Billy...

"I'm going to get you out of there. I said it, and I promise it, Hargrove. I know it's not going to make you happy, but I made up my mind. Whatever I have to do, I can't let you stay there. Just...don't lose your shit, please." Steve pleaded as he looked at his face and then gingerly reached out to touch him. It was strange, not at all like a normal dream. Steve's hand hovered above Billy's hand, his voice hushed and urgent, "I just love you, so, so much Billy--" His hand touched Billy's and it was like a bolt going through the both of them, neither instantly disappearing at the moment. If anything, it was like he could *really* feel Billy, and he never had a dream like that.

Steve looked over at Billy, a little dumbfounded.

The touch was the only thing that stopped Billy from protesting, from telling Steve *no*. He looked down in shock, his eyes growing wide as he actually *felt* Steve touch him. Something inside of him cracked and he squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel the tears as they started to slip down his cheeks. In that moment, he felt so fucking weak, but after more than week of being tortured--broken apart and then knitted back together again--the touch felt so fucking good that he couldn't help himself.

"I love you, too, Steve," Billy gritted out. He shifted and then opened his eyes to look at him. They were still unbearably lifeless compared to his normal fire, but at least he was here, right? He leaned forward, settling one hand on the bed to keep his balance. "Don't... don't give up on me, okay?" Was all he could say before he tilted his head and pressed their lips together.

Steve moaned desperately into his mouth, his hands finding his way

around his body and clutching at his back. He pulled Billy against him, brought him as close as he possibly could as he moved against him. It was a strange sensation, like he was there and solid, but he also wasn't. Steve kissed him frantically, like he was going to lose him in just a moment when he actually woke up.

Steve pressed his hands along Billy, scrambling to touch him as much as possible. He arched up as he grabbed him, whispering that he loved Billy against his lips. He wasn't sure when he would be able to say it again, tell Billy his feelings for him. When his tongue touched Billy's, he started to shake from the inside out, as if he was cold--*really cold* , but Billy's mouth was all that mattered.

He could feel Billy being pulled away from him and Steve whimpered, kissed him even harder as they were being pulled apart by some unseen force. "I love you, I love you, God I love you--Billy--"

Snapping back into reality was so unbearably painful that, as Billy blinked up at the ceiling, he choked out a sob. Waking up had been one of the hardest things he had ever done. He already missed Steve's warmth--his hands, his lips, those words that had come from him so fucking easily.

I love you .

Billy sat up slowly on his bed and reached up to wipe the tears off of his face. He wasn't sure what time it was. What day it was. He didn't even know if it was night or day. They had fucked with him so much that those basic things were just lost. He figured if he slept and woke up, it was the next day, even if it wasn't. He brought in a shuddering breath and licked his lips, the taste of salt from his tears making him cringe.

At least he had his dreams, right? It wasn't like they could rip that from him. He shifted until his back rested against the wall. His eyelids started drooping again, and that was when he figured he hadn't actually slept long. He was just so exhausted.

Steve jerked up with a soft cry, his eyes wide as he looked around his room, expecting the blonde to come to his side and wrap his arms around him, ask if he had another nightmare. His heart was racing and he felt himself panting, his vision starting to dim.

It was just a dream, as he thought, but as he struggled to catch his breath, and it felt so different from a panic attack. His teeth chattered. He was cold, really fucking cold. Steve gathered up the blankets, wrapped them around himself as he laid back. He rubbed his hands together, tried to will them warm, but as he lifted a hand to his face, he could swear his fingers were pale blue.

“What the fuck, what the fuck...” Steve shook his head hard, unable to fall asleep as that cold seeped into his bones. Wasn’t it supposed to be easier to sleep cold? He rose from his bed slowly, his heart still pounding and his thoughts a blur.

The chill that flowed throughout his body eventually settled, but it settled deep within his chest. It swirled and pulled, almost *ached* . The tugging was the worst part of it, though, as if it was urging Steve to get up, to move, to follow whatever that coldness was tethered to. It didn’t make sense, though. It was a dream. Billy had been part of a dream, and even though that kiss had led to the cold sucking out Steve’s warmth, it *meant* something.

It had to, right? That was why there was a tugging sensation at Steve. That was why he felt the urge to do *something* .

He dropped the blankets to the ground, still shaking as he looked around his room. None of it made sense, it had been...just so vivid and strange. Steve frowned as he grabbed his pants and a sweater, slipped them on before he headed downstairs. For some strange reason, moving made him feel much better--he still shook uncontrollably, unceasing, but it eased some sort of pressure inside him.

Steve looked in the living room and took in the forms of all the kids. Lucas and Max had scooted closer sometime during the night, slept back to back. Dustin was sprawled over the floor, one of his hands on Will’s chest, his fingers sometimes twitching. Will simply looked peaceful, more relaxed than he did awake, and far more like the child

he actually was. Mike and El were both curled together, Mike's hand on hers as he snored softly.

The longer he stayed there though, watching the kids, the colder he became. Steve hurried to the kitchen and scribbled a little note, once again feeling some pressure relieved as he moved about. He nearly ran to the front of the house after grabbing his car keys. Maybe just a drive--that seemed reasonable enough, really. Many people drove when they couldn't sleep. Not *Steve* , but today was a weird day, good a day to start as any.

His thoughts came to him in jumbles, his fingers twitching on the steering wheel as he drove to the outskirts of Hawkins. There was no music in the car and he wouldn't be able to really recall anything that he saw, but the first time he came to was when he finally parked. Steve took his keys out of the ignition and set them up under the mirror. He opened his car and stepped out.

The fields, he was at the fields. Steve blinked for several moments, not even sure how he managed to find his way here. His thoughts rolled through his mind like clouds, this was where he went into the Upside Down with the kids. What the fuck was he doing here? The shaking increased again, made his stomach painfully clench, and he struggled to find something to do with his hands, choosing to twist at his seams of his jeans.

Unfortunately, whatever was pulling Steve was coming from the same fucking place he had fought the kids over with, where the hole was. It wanted him there, and wasn't that a joke? After a dream with Billy in it, with his slumped shoulders and lifeless eyes, whatever was swirling inside of Steve was encouraging him to *go* . It wanted him in the tunnels, and for extra encouragement, the cold spread through his chest and into his limbs, coiling all the way down into his fingertips.

The longer Steve stood there, hesitant about going in, the colder he got. It almost became painful to just *breathe* . The cold was perpetual and seemed never-ending, and Steve would have to follow whatever was going on in order to alleviate the chill.

Steve opened his car door and popped the trunk. He always had his tools in the car and once again, he gave into the sensation as he

grabbed his bat and a shovel. It didn't make any fucking sense but he walked to the middle of the field and dropped his bat before he began to dig.

His muscles *ached* , painfully ached, but they didn't burn. If anything, it made the cold spread deeper inside him and even though it should make him want to stop, to avoid the cold, Steve felt compelled to continue. It wasn't a large hole and he was unsure how long he had been out there when he finally hit the membrane between this world and the Upside Down. He was sweating, his sweater stuck to his back as he panted. There was dirt in his hair and along his face. When Steve licked his lips, he could taste it in his mouth.

It was when he went back to his trunk, grabbing a pair of goggles and a bandana, that Steve realize that this was what Max said. The tunnels would be on the opposite side of Billy. That's how they could find him. But strangely, that wasn't what Steve was doing. This wasn't about rescuing Billy; he didn't even know where Billy was, but he couldn't stop digging. He didn't stop himself from putting on the goggles and covering his mouth. And Steve didn't stop himself from lowering his body down into the hole.

Something must have happened between Billy and the lab because the atmosphere wasn't cold, stale, *or* dead. It was thick and rolling, as if the energy and vibrations of the tunnels *knew* it would have a conduit again. As if it could tell that the men were close to opening the dimension again through the teenager they had been picking apart.

It clearly wasn't as powerful as it had been. Not yet, anyway, but the slick vines, the hissing, was a sign that there was life again. It was a living, breathing monstrosity and it was pulling Steve back into its bowels. Yet, as soon as Steve's feet hit the ground, as soon as he righted himself, the cold that had been seeping through his body retracted and settled within his chest again. *Content* .

The thrum was still there, though, that pull that had encouraged Steve to move in the first place. The tunnels were vast and there were so many, but whatever resided in Steve knew *exactly* where it wanted him to go, and like an inherent compass, it pushed him in one specific direction.

What Steve should feel was frightened, he was back in this place, and the memories flooded back to him, crashed in tumultuous waves that threatened to overtake him. But that pull was strangely stronger. So, even with his heart pounding and the sweat so bad that his hair stuck to the nape of his neck, Steve kept walking towards that pull.

He wasn't sure how long he walked until he just felt warm, really warm, unbearably warm, and that made him stop a moment. It had come on as sudden as the cold. Sweat was stinging his eyes and his heart was pounding so fast that he felt dizzy. At one point, he fell onto his hands and knees, groaning before he upheaved anything that was in his stomach.

It was unlike anything Steve felt before, and he coughed hard until his lungs started to burn, too, pushed against his heart and up into his throat. It was never warm down here; his fingers dug into some vines below him and they pulsed underneath his grip, tried to pull him down below. Steve shook his head, still coughing, when he pulled up and righted himself. Breathing was difficult, thinking was difficult, and he tore off the bandana and the goggles.

Steve pressed the back of his hand to his forehead, similar to what he recalled his mother doing when he had a fever. He wanted to fucking scream, but that pull was *still there*, so Steve forced himself to continue further into the hellhole, veins crunching and squishing under his sneakers.

It might have been minutes or even hours when he reached a wall inside the Upside Down. And Steve had no idea why this wall was so significant, but it was. This was where the pull was coming from. Steve just fucking knew it, felt that knowledge settle into his bones as he took his lighter and pressed it into the vines.

As soon as the heat hit the vines and they started to sizzle, that familiar scream pitched high behind Steve. Before he could respond, something had wrapped around his calf, teeth latching onto him through his jeans. It pulled, knocked him onto his knees, and then his hands as it began to drag him, his stomach and chest sliding along the slick ground.

It didn't matter how fast Steve was. The movements around him, the

scuttling, hissing, and screeches, were clear signs that the demodogs were back. The one attached to his leg kept pulling until he was a good twenty feet away from the wall he had been trying to burn away. The others stalked in circles, impatient, obviously waiting for when he was basically ready to be eaten.

Steve kept hearing this high pitched noise ringing in his ears, and it took him time to realize that it was him, screaming. He swung his arms out, scrabbling for his bat, for fucking something to hit it with. Steve felt its mouth clamp onto his arm and his body arched up in pain as he screamed and cursed. How many were there? He couldn't fight them all off!

His heels dug into the slippery vines below him, and tears began to stream down his face as he rolled around on the ground, tried to knock its thick, muscular frame off with his knees, using his legs as leverage. Steve didn't want to fucking die here, didn't want to end up like Barbara or Bob, fucking leave everybody he had come to love and care for. It was every fucking nightmare, every fucking sleeping moment that jerked him awake at night--being pinned under a demodog, about to be torn to pieces.

Steve screamed hysterically as his hand finally made purchase along the roots there, still pulsing and grabbing at his fingers, to the middle of his bat. He firmly grabbed it, one of the nails pushing into and through his index finger, and he didn't care, didn't feel that, as he tightened his grip and brought it up, beating the dog's side as hard as he could to knock it the fuck off of him so he could get up and run.

He shouted, cried out, and it released his arm once, some of its greyish blue guts and blood sprayed over Steve's face. He screamed in disgust then but kept hitting, shoving the bat once into its mouth and when it tried to seize it in those flaps, he wrenched the bat out rapidly and it let out a howl of its own. More of its blood poured out onto Steve, and he could *taste* it in his mouth, like the bitter root of a plant. Its teeth knocked loose and cut into his cheek as he shrieked. Then, it momentarily jerked back enough for Steve to partially sit up when it came back at him in full force.

Steve could see the other dogs in the distance as it dug its claws into his shoulders and clamped its mouth over part of his chest. His blood

dripped hot and wet in large rivlets down his stomach, mixing with the icy guts of the dog as he sobbed and wetly gasped out in pain. This couldn't be it, it just couldn't. The kids would never forgive him, Billy would be stuck in that place, live out his life as a fucking human experiment, until he either died or wanted to die. Steve couldn't allow that to happen, he loved them all too much to die here like this. He was Steve Fucking Harrington and he was going to fucking kill this dog.

Steve let out a bellow from within the core of his being, primal and terrifying, as he grabbed onto his head with both hands. There was blood in his mouth, his own and the dog's, as he pressed his hands in on its head. Blood was running down his face, into his eyes, down his nose, and into his mouth. He dug deep inside himself and yelled as he pressed his hands in, his fingers sunk in through the first membrane of the creature's flesh and Steve could feel it, pulsing and vibrating around his fingertips as something took over him.

He felt light; it was sudden and somewhat eerily beautiful, before the sparks came. It flowed out of him like a river, only a trickle at first before a dam broke and there was a flood that rushed over him. Steve welcomed it. He could feel it from the base of his spine shooting all the way up through his body, jolted him into anger, consciousness, and *strength*. The dog began to roar in confusion, tried to jerk its body away as Steve held it there, grunting in exertion. He wasn't going to let it run, no, it was going to *pay* for fucking with him. Steve held it there as long as he could, screaming into its face with effort as it twitched in pain, confused and desperate as smoke began to come out of his mouth. He felt it spasm rapidly, saw its insides light up, before it jerked a final time and went limp.

Steve shoved it off him with a cry and he didn't see any more of the demodogs in the chamber.

Whatever chill that had taken his body, that had swirled into his chest and *pulled* him, now felt charged. It wasn't just cold anymore. It pulsed inside of Steve, and like a web, it sent vibrations through his body, signals, forcing him to pay attention to the way his body lit up and responded. It seemed as if the mixture of the Upside Down and whatever Steve had pulled from Billy (had it been Billy?) created something bigger, and *that* had latched itself onto Steve's need to

protect .

Steve panted and rose to his feet slowly. He felt dizzy and nauseous, but also *amazing* and *powerful* . Steve tried to calm his still racing heart as he raised his hands up. They were twinged and discolored from the blood of the demodog still on him, but there was a soft pure, white spark that danced between his fingertips, softly crackling to its own beat. Steve glanced back at the dead dog, still smoking on the ground before he took a deep breath. He swallowed and steeled his resolve before he hurried back to the spot the dog dragged him from. That was where Steve needed to be.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sometimes you just gotta ~feel~ it.

23. Chapter 23

Summary for the Chapter:

Graphic torture in the first scene, but that should be the last of it (maybe).

Billy woke with a start when hands latched onto his shoulders. He immediately began to struggle, but when he realized where he was and what was happening, he became pliant. He let them pull him up from the bed, but he stumbled almost immediately. He was starving and light headed from it. Probably his fault, though. He hadn't eaten the last couple of times they had offered him what they thought was food. It was always white, pasty substance that he doubted even passed for oatmeal.

It was then that Billy realized he was chuckling over the food they tried to feed him. He was going insane, wasn't he? This place was driving him into depths that Neil never managed to touch. He wrapped his arms around his waist, something that had become almost habitual in the lab, as he walked down the hall. The men were behind him. He could hear their footsteps, but they didn't have to guide him anymore. He generally understood where to go.

"To the left," the gruff voice made Billy pause and he felt like scowling, but he was too exhausted. He turned and walked into the room. It was sterilized. It looked clean, which was different than the other rooms he had been in. He glanced around and shuffled forward as soon as the men stepped up behind him.

"Lay down," again with the orders. Billy swallowed and climbed onto the bed. He eased himself back onto the stiff mattress and closed his eyes as they began to strap him in. Honestly, this was starting to get old. Maybe he would become so used to it that he could sleep through it?

That was laughable.

Sleep was the only place that he felt any true peace anyway. If they allowed him just to sleep, this entire place might be bearable. *I love*

you . It was just a dream, just wishful thinking, but it felt so real, Steve kissing and arching under him as he heatedly whispered that to Billy. That moment though was going to be enough to keep him going a little longer, until the next dream like that, anyway.

They strapped him in tightly, and even though he couldn't see Brenner, Billy was sure he was watching. The sick fuck always watched. A tray was wheeled into Billy's side and he couldn't see what was on it, but somehow the air was different, thicker. There were two of them in the room, and they wordlessly began to slip into surgical gowns and placed masks and clear goggles over their eyes. This wasn't right, it was too quiet, too professional, and so unsettling. Nobody spoke a word to Billy as the one passed the other a pair of scissors and they slowly cut up the middle of Billy's shirt. The soft, hissing snip snip snip was the only noise in the room.

Sterile . Billy blinked and then began to squirm. He knew why things were fucking sterile. It was just like the hospital, and as he slowly began to connect the dots, panic seized his gut. He swallowed and looked around the room until he found the glass window he knew Brenner was standing behind. He stared at it, almost pleading. They weren't even talking to him this time. They weren't addressing that he was here or *alive* .

"Wait--what're you doing--" Billy sucked in a sharp breath and held it so that the scissors didn't cut his stomach as they slid through the hospital scrubs like butter. He thrashed, but he didn't actually move much. The straps were tighter this go around, too, and that meant that whatever they planned, it was going to fucking hurt.

"Brenner!" Billy's voice almost became desperate. "Brenner, I'll go in the tank. I'll find that place for you. I'll do it--just *please* --whatever they're doing. Make them *stop* ."

But there was no response from Brenner, from any of them, as one lifted a scalpel from the tray, and leaned over Billy. It was a woman, maybe the woman from before, and she didn't even look up at Billy as she placed the blade at the top of Billy's chest, between his clavicles. When she started to drag the blade down, it was slow, precise, and Billy could feel every tip and tremble of her hand as it sliced through his skin. The blood welled up instantly, running down

the sides of his chest and abdomen. Brenner wasn't going to stop them. This wasn't punishment from before. This was all planned.

They stopped for just a few moments, but it wasn't out of mercy or any sense of altruism. The one who hadn't cut him wheeled over several machines and began to hook Billy up, all to monitor his bodily functions and reactions. Once the sensors were pressed to his skin, the sound of Billy's rapid heartbeat pounded in the room. Fingers probed at the split flesh, separating the skin there, digging *inside* him.

Billy may have missed a couple of meals, but that didn't stop him from feeling like he was going to throw up. He grit his teeth as the woman cut down his chest and his stomach, cut through his skin and some of his muscle wall. The pain lit up his vision and warmth swept over his skin and slowly began to burn. He finally let out a small cry, even as his skin and muscles began to knit back together.

The knitting moved just about as fast as the cutting did. As soon as the woman's blade left his skin, the muscles began to tremble and burn as the wound closed. His skin followed soon after. Despite that, Billy squirmed on the table and panted out little pleas for them to stop. He didn't care if he healed immediately. He didn't care if he would be *okay*.

They were fucking cutting him open like some sort of science experiment. The thought made him laugh because he *was* their experiment, and the sound of his laughter was crazed, hysterical to even his ears.

He wasn't a person to any of them, just another means to an end, and no matter how Brenner justified this to himself, he was a fucking monster just like that thing in the trunk.

The woman kept her fingers inside of him, pressing him apart as the other grabbed a small device. Billy had never never seen anything like it but it was placed on top of his chest, and when he started to turn it, it was hard not to think about the jack of a car--but instead of lifting Billy up, it was spreading him *open*, holding the flesh apart.

The panicked screaming was his own. How was this *not* going to kill

him? How much were they going to do? How much would they take from him? Blood rushed to the surface and it was almost gently dabbed away with gauze when there was a loud whirring noise to his left. It was a device with what looked like the end of a box cutter blade on it, Billy could see that, feel its vibrations before it even touched him, and he realized it was a saw when it made contact with his sternum. The sound of his heart racing, his ribs cracking, and his screams echoing in the room.

“Brenner! Please--Please!” Billy’s screams were garbled pleas. He was *begging* for them to stop. He couldn’t writhe. He couldn’t pull away. Everything hurt so fucking badly, no matter how quickly his body healed itself. As they began to grind away and break his bones, the healing began to move at a speed that was making his mind blip out. Blood began to drain down the side of his face from his nose as the pain, the noise of the cracking and bone, and the feeling of that woman’s fingers in his body began to send him into unconsciousness.

Just as Billy was sure he’d actually die, that they’d pushed it too far, a red light overtook the room. It flashed repeatedly and Brenner, that fucking asshole, came over the intercom. Billy couldn’t hear him, not well, anyway. He was too focused on trying to survive this. However, the two people above him, the people who were fucking torturing him, paused and began to pull away. The tools were removed from his body, and Billy wailed as they were, but the noise was hoarse and fucking pathetic at this point.

The red flashed behind Billy’s eyes, made him feel even more ill, and it was like he was swimming; his entire world wasn’t grounded. There was blood in his mouth, but there was blood everywhere. His chest slowly closing back in now that there weren’t any tools there.

His ears were ringing, the rapid pulse of the heart monitor still hooked up, and then screaming. Billy was so disoriented that the most logical conclusion was that it was him. He was still screaming, but when his flesh came back together and he was able to close his mouth, Billy realized it wasn’t him. It was outside the room.

~*~

There was one shot, just one, before there was a howl of agony,

louder than the alarm, and flashes of bright light between the cracks of the door. The door splintered open and in burst a figure. At first it was hard to make out, hard to see who it was, with his own vision only slowly coming into focus after healing.

The figure gripped the edge of the door, body trembling violently and there were sparks of electricity dancing from the lights in the ceiling before the bulbs burst and the only thing left was the harsh flash of the red.

His hair and face were matted with blood and what appeared to be mud, Steve looked like he was barely alive, and the rest of him fared no better. Steve's once light green shirt was nearly black across his chest and stomach, and the only way to tell it was once green was because there were flecks of it amongst the muck on his sleeves, standing out like stars. His jeans were caked in dirt and slime and his sneakers were grey.

Steve's bat, coated in blood and guts, clattered loudly to the floor when he dropped it, and he lifted his head up slowly, made eye contact with the broken boy on the bed. Steve's eyes were blown wide, crazed, and he struggled to catch his breath just as if he was in the throes of a panic attack. His voice broke, as did the rest of him, when tears filled his eyes, "Billy--!"

At first, Billy was *sure* he was dreaming. He had passed out and they were still opening him up and he was *dreaming* . He tilted his head to the side and stared at the door, his own eyes wide and wet with confusion. He shook his head and tried to twist in the straps, tried to force them to snap. They didn't, and when he failed again, he let out a broken sound of distress. This wasn't *real* . There was no way Steve was here, and even then, Steve looked like someone who was lit up with fucking electricity. He looked *ethereal* .

"Steve, Steve," Billy began to babble and he was crying again, harder than he had in a couple of days now. "Please, please. Untie me. Let me touch you, *please let me touch you* ." He tried to ignore how the red lights glimmered off of all the blood, all of *his* blood. He tried to ignore the tools that were on the ground now, the ones used to open him up so they could explore his body.

If Steve *was* real, Billy needed to touch him. That would be the only way he'd *know* .

Steve staggered over to Billy, his body quaked and when he finally made his way to the table, Steve slipped once in the blood on the floor, his sneaker sliding forward out from under him. He hovered over Billy, felt Billy's eyes roam over him but Steve was dumbstruck. Tears fell from his eyes and his hands trembled before he touched Billy, there was just *so much blood* . How was Billy still alive? How was he talking to Steve? Maybe he was too late. Maybe Steve was going to get him out there, and then Billy was going to die with him.

Steve couldn't stop the sob that bubbled up from his lips as he harshly yanked the straps off of Billy's arms and he touched his chest tenderly, like he was going to be the one to break the blonde. Steve desperately looked for the source of the bleeding, "No, no, no--"

As soon as Steve took the straps off of his arms, Billy was up and reaching for him. He wrapped his arms around Steve and ignored the muck and grime as it slid over his skin. His whole body began to shake as he breathed Steve in. His eyes snapped closed and another pained, distraught noise forced itself passed his lips as he clutched to Steve. The angle was weird--it twisted his torso, but god, he was touching Steve again. He was touching him and he was *solid* . He was real.

But it only lasted a few, precious seconds.

A hand took hold of Steve's hair and yanked him back so roughly that it stunned Billy. He jerked and grunted against the rest of the binds on his body. His eyes shot wide as the man who had shoved a gun down his throat snarled at him.

"Remember what I said, *dog* ?" He snarled, twisting his fingers in Steve's hair and forcing his head to the side. "You do what you're told. You comply with *orders* and I wouldn't blow his fucking brain out. You didn't do that, did you? You fucking defied us. Defied Dr. Brenner." He waved his other hand, which held the same gun that had been shoved down Billy's throat.

Billy scrambled, yanking at the rest of his bindings. When he was

free, he almost fell off the side of the bed, but managed to stumble to his feet. Rage boiled into his blood, sang through his body, shot inside of him like an old fucking friend. He stared at Thing Two (seriously, the guy should have given him a name) and sneered, his bloodied teeth glinting in the red light.

“Let go of him,” Billy curled his fingers into fists and snarled as the man laughed.

“What are *you* going to do, you worthless piece of shit? All you’re good for was experiments, and you couldn’t even do *those* right,” The guy shoved the barrel of the gun against Steve’s temple and Billy *exploded* .

“Don’t fucking *touch him*, ” Billy all but screamed, and suddenly, the gun clattered to the floor. The guy let out a sharp cry and stumbled back. Billy was walking toward him, fresh blood slipping from his nose as bones began to crack, bend, and *snap* in the hand that had held the gun to Steve’s temple.

“What the *fuck* ,” the guy scrambled back and Billy laughed, but it was an empty, deranged noise. The guy’s arm shattered next, hanging at an odd angle, and Billy simply stood there and let his mind course through his body, breaking *breaking breaking* .

Steve stood there in horror when the man scrambled away from him, holding his hand and then his arm as he shrilly screamed and the gun clattered to the floor. One second he grabbed for Billy and the next there was a gun to his temple. It was hard to move, to think, and despite everything that was happening, Steve had been seized with quiet panic, because it was still a gun against him, until Billy came towards them.

With that look. Steve caught a glimpse of it that night at the Byers, insane and unleashed. He could hear Dustin in the back of his mind, *Billy’s dangerous*. Steve wasn’t sure what was happening when he stood there, watching this man turn into some sort of *creature* by Billy —broken and pitiful and his screams were so fucking loud.

Steve watched his legs, back, ribs, arms, all break as blood poured from his mouth. Steve wanted to throw up but there was nothing left

in him, nothing left of him. And then Billy laughed.

That was the worst thing, the most painful thing. Not the tunnels, the smoking demodog, not whatever was happening to him, but that *sound* Billy made. Steve felt lightheaded; he screamed in a desperate sob, and covered his ears for a moment.

“BILLY—STOP IT, PLEASE—!”

Steve’s voice seemed to snap Billy out of it. His eyes, wild and tinted with fear, flew to Steve and then to the man on the floor. His mind snapped back into his body and it made him flinch, but he squatted down next to the man, anyway, and grinned. His heart was racing because *he* had done this to him without touching him. Without thinking. He had been about to hurt Steve and all Billy could do or think was *protect* .

“You’ll never hurt another child again,” Billy murmured, “you’ll never break any of my bones again. You’ll never use him against me again.” He leaned forward so they were breathing in each other’s air, him gasping wetly and Billy seething. “Looks like the dog turned on its master, eh?” He stood, then, and flexed his fingers as he looked over the man’s broken body.

When Billy finally turned to Steve, that irrational, monstrous look melted off of his face. Fear replaced it--fear and self-loathing because Steve was looking at him like the experiment that Brenner made him. He stepped away from Steve and swallowed. His fingers grabbed the bloody edges of the hospital gown he wore and he pulled them together tightly over his body. He didn’t want Steve to see all of the little nicks and scars that those assholes had caused before the healing had actually kicked in and became useful. He didn’t want Steve to keep looking at him like he didn’t *know* him.

Maybe Steve didn’t anymore.

“I’m not sorry,” Billy choked out and tears burned into his eyes. “I’m not sorry. I’m not.” The man on the floor was more of a monster than he was, and he knew Steve didn’t really know that, but he *was* . He was backing up again, away from Steve, essentially cornering himself in the room.

Billy didn't want Steve looking at him like that. It broke what little bit of himself he had. His back touched the tiled wall and he started to slide down, repeating 'I'm not' as he went. Not sorry. Not a monster. Not going to hurt Steve. The mumbling was endless.

The alarm was still going off as Steve watched Billy, watched him move away and speak in harsh whispers and thoughts. He swallowed and looked to the body on the floor. It took a ragged, final wet gasp and moved no more.

Steve whimpered before he looked back at Billy. The blonde was breaking. Maybe Steve *was* too late and he was already broken, but Steve had to get them both out of here or they were going to end up dead. Steve walked over swiftly to Billy and knelt down beside him. He searched Billy's face, his eyes. Maybe this is what Billy did for him often after a panic attack. It was hard for Steve to remember sometimes.

"Babe, we gotta get up, get gotta get up and get out of here. I need you to do that for me, okay? We can't fucking stay here, Billy *please* —" Steve tilted Billy's head up and pressed his trembling lips to the blonde's. Steve implored him through that kiss to come back to himself, come back to life, and to come back to *Steve* .

What was Steve going to do if he couldn't get Billy moving, couldn't get him up and out? He wasn't going to abandon him, and then they would both be in here and whatever Steve witnessed—they would do that more, use him to hurt Billy, break him until he wasn't a person anymore. Steve half sobbed, "Please *get up* —I love you, Billy—"

When Steve moved down beside him, Billy flinched and actually *cowered* away from him. His fingers tightened in the hospital gown he wore and it felt like Billy was trying to make himself seem smaller--to *look* smaller. Even as Steve spoke, his eyes stayed trained forward on the man he had killed without *touching* . Maybe he was a monster. Maybe he deserved to be left alone or tortured or made into a science experiment. Maybe he *wasn't* good enough for anyone.

Billy's thoughts tumbled away as Steve tilted his face up and pressed their lips together. As the kiss continued, Billy squeezed his eyes shut and hated that he was crying again. After a week of torture--of

broken bones, sliced skin, and verbal abuse--Steve was so fucking *gentle*. It was so foreign. Billy had been convinced that he was going to die there, that he would spend the rest of whatever time he had recovering from broken bones and bruised muscles.

Something began to burn inside of Billy--began to *reach* toward Steve. He wasn't sure why. He couldn't place it, but when he let go of his gown, he curled his fingers into Steve's sweater. He could feel the blood and muck, could *feel* the Upside Down (fuck Brenner). His concern quickly outweighed whatever fucked up thoughts were going down in his head as Steve's injuries began to *speak to him* .

"You're hurt," Billy mumbled. "You...Steve. You're so injured--"

"We don't--we don't have time for that. We have to go now, we can go back through the tunnels and get to my car, please, Billy--" Steve tugged him up, as gently and slowly as he possibly could in the situation, even though he wanted to yank Billy out the door. The blonde would freak out if he tried something like that.

The truth was that he felt like he was going to pass out at any moment, Steve could feel that his wounds weren't really clotting. Maybe they were just too deep for that, but not so severe he couldn't keep moving. It was hard to gauge it, but his chest, leg and arm fucking *ached* where the demodog managed to bite him. Probably the more pressing concern was that some of it went into his mouth, and Steve knew *something* was happening to him inside. The pain was excruciating but his body was *thrumming* , fucking alive, and it was something beyond the adrenaline. Steve would worry about all that when they were in the car.

Steve took Billy's hands in his own, gripped them as he searched his gaze, "We have to leave now. Are you with me, Billy? Pl-please babe?" Steve gingerly pulled him closer to the door, removing one of his hands to bend down and grab the bat. He flexed his fingers against the handle; the index finger was broken from earlier.

Billy tensed as Steve pulled him up and away from the wall. He almost dug his heels into the ground, but as soon as he resisted, he slipped on his *own fucking blood* . When his gaze dropped to the floor, he was glad he hadn't eaten anything. Being strapped down and

seeing the tools was one thing. Now? Standing and staring at the puddles of blood, the pieces of equipment that kept him open? It made it so much more *real* .

“Wait--wait,” Billy tugged his hand out of Steve’s and turned to rummage through the cabinets. As soon as he found extra scrubs, he peeled his own bloody clothes off and let it drop to the ground. He grabbed a pair of the bottoms and tugged them onto his body. The shirt was next. They were huge on him, but he didn’t care. He didn’t want to walk around soaked like that, and he needed *pants* .

At least there had been some in here, Billy mused bitterly as he wandered up to Steve again. He finally started to feel more like himself; not that it was necessarily a win. He reached out to Steve and paused as the coldness from his first injection came back and swirled around his own hand and then targeted his finger.

What the fuck?

Billy glanced down and realized that Steve’s finger was sitting at an odd angle. Could he...? He hesitated and then reached out to slide his hand over Steve’s injured one.

“Do you trust me?” Billy murmured. Fuck, did he even trust himself? Before Steve could respond, warmth covered up the chill in his hand and slid around Steve’s. It felt warm, really fucking warm, for a few seconds as Steve’s finger began to knit back together. When the warmth slowed, the healing stopped, and Billy flinched back as blood began to run down his lips from his nose again.

Steve raised a trembling hand to his face, flexed his fingers and his hand slowly before he looked at Billy again. Billy had done that. He had for sure done that. Steve’s mouth was open in disbelief, he said he could heal himself and clearly heal people, as well as break them. Steve snapped his mouth shut and swallowed. He searched Billy’s eyes again, “ *Later* , okay?”

Steve grabbed Billy’s hand with his now uninjured hand as he maneuvered them both in the direction of the wall that that Steve had broken through. He wasn’t even sure how he did it really. He had used the bat and his hands, but there was steel and brick--and it

looked melted. But that time was almost a blur, and Steve could hear people yelling for them, screaming for them to stop moving or they would shoot.

He grabbed at Billy, pressed himself beside him. Steve readied himself to defend Billy with his own body from being killed, or worse, taken back into the bowels of this place. The hair on his arms stood up, like they were touched by static electricity, when there was a blur running past both of them. It leapt into the air onto the nearest figure that approached them, let out a screech, and latched onto the man's head. Steve knew what it was when the man began to scream, before there was a loud *crunch*. The demodog yanked its body back and forth, tore at his face and stripped the flesh there with its teeth as the other soldiers yelled, and fired their guns upon the dog.

Steve's eyes were wide a moment as he watched, his heart pounding so hard he wondered if this is what it felt like right before you died. It was above. It was inside their world. Was there only one? Was it there before Steve pushed through or had he accidentally opened the Gate? Steve felt a crescendo of rising panic within him as he watched it feed, barely phased by the bullets versus the ravenous hunger it faced. Steve grabbed Billy and pushed him into the tunnels of the Upside down and fell after him.

Billy had tried to take in everything, but as Steve encouraged him down the hall, his brain flickered back to the tank, the torture, and he was starting to shut down again. He still followed, but his reaction time was off and as Steve moved, he had to actually shift Billy to get him to go. It wasn't surprising, then, that Billy went pliant when Steve grabbed him and forced him to the side.

The gore from the demodog apparently didn't bother Billy. It should have. It was one of those things he had found on the bus. He should be horrified, but after the week in the lab? And Brenner's insistence that he *find* those things? He was surprised by little. He watched as the dog tore the guy's face off, and Billy didn't feel a fucking thing. He didn't feel bad. He probably should have, but it was almost impossible to feel anything at this point.

The sudden shove that Steve made against his chest startled Billy, though. He tumbled back and winced as he fell onto--what the fuck?

He looked beneath him and stared at the vines. They began to move and he hissed. Okay, *that* was creepy. He stumbled to his feet and looked at Steve as he joined him.

“What... Is this the--” Billy glanced around and swallowed. “Is this what they were trying to make me find?”

“We have to go, we have to move *now* !” Steve didn’t answer him, still holding onto his bat as he grabbed Billy’s hand and started to move swiftly through the tunnels, his mind racing faster than they were down the turns of the tunnels. Steve’s blood was pumping and he was terrified, truly terrified, as he moved away from being directly under the lab.

Steve hadn’t fucking opened it, right? Maybe only one of them got through, and they were going to kill it. Maybe it was already open, those creatures were still alive, still right under Hawkins, like worms in the dirt. Maybe it was the lab--they had been fucking around for god knows how long, maybe they never stopped. Maybe El only thought she closed, or--or maybe she did and that Mind Flayer broke it again. It couldn’t have been him, it fucking couldn’t.

Steve tripped over a vine, knocked himself into one of the walls as he looked up for a moment, his breathing ragged. Shit, not now, not *now* . Steve closed his eyes a moment and whimpered, exhaled loudly and shakily through his lips to calm down. He couldn’t do this now; they had to get the fuck out of here before he thought about this. One of those fucking things could be tracking them for all he knew--

“Oh, God--” Steve dropped Billy’s hand and covered his face for a moment, his muscles strained as he struggled for air.

Billy had been moving with Steve, although it was difficult to wrap his head around what was going on--what was around them. He stumbled when Steve tripped and then winced. Steve had hit the wall of vines *hard* and now he seemed to be panicking. Billy stood, frozen, staring at Steve as his hand was dropped. Steve was having another panic attack. He was panicking and Billy knew how to deal with this, he *did* .

But what if Billy hurt him? What if he touched him and Steve began

to break, like the man had? Hell, he hadn't even *touched* the guy. He looked around frantically, as if there was a damned answer in the tunnels. There were only shadows and hissing, though, noises that he couldn't place. He looked back to Steve and then stepped closer to him. What if Steve freaked out with Billy this close now? What if...

He reached out and slid his hand over the injury on Steve's arm. It pulsed beneath his hand, *pulled* him to Steve. He got close enough that their chests were touching now and then used his other hand to gently pull one of Steve's hands away from his face.

"Steve...?" Billy tried to ignore the scuffling around them. He tried to ignore the urge to continue to run, and instead, pressed himself against Steve's body. The warmth that blasted through him left him breathless and he concentrated on the wound. All of those deep cuts, those gouges made by the petal-faced demodog, began to stitch together and seal. Billy brushed his forehead against Steve's and closed his eyes.

It was easier to see Steve's body with his eyes closed. It burned bright behind his eyes, but his injuries burned brighter.

Steve's eyes were open and wet with unshed tears as Billy pressed his body against Steve's, touched him tenderly, just like Steve was used to following one of his panic attacks. Steve could feel his body change, heal, and it was a strange sensation, but not unfamiliar. It wasn't that same extreme warmth from earlier when he first woke up entered the tunnels, more pleasantly warm around the edges, but he was familiar enough to recognize it.

Steve felt dizzy as the skin closed together, but lightheaded in a way similar to a roller coaster--disorienting but weirdly pleasant and exciting. He raised a hand to Billy's cheek and touched him softly, pressed his thumb above Billy's upper lip. "You're bleeding," Steve murmured softly in wonder, searching over Billy's face until the blonde slowly opened his eyes.

He swallowed hard. He wanted to ask what happened to Billy, what was happening to *them* ? Steve was changing, too. He could feel it fluttering against his spine, constantly curling and uncurling. There was no point in asking if Billy had done that, healed him, he clearly

had.

Steve turned his head slightly, looked at Billy's hand still holding onto his and the inside of his wrist. The number "13" there, in large, mechanical font.

Having Steve's hand on him, even if it was his thumb, made his whole world shake. He had convinced himself that this wasn't going to happen again, that this was something he would get in his dreams and only his dreams. He still questioned if he was dreaming, but it felt *real*. Steve's body heat was real, right? The pressure on his skin from his thumb was real. It had to be. He leaned away enough so he could tilt his head and kiss the pad of Steve's thumb.

However, as Steve's eyes caught sight of the number on his wrist, he tensed and yanked his hand away. He placed it behind his back and clenched that hand into a fist. He hadn't moved, otherwise, kept himself close to Steve. He was beginning to tire from healing himself, from healing Steve, and he knew that this type of exhaustion was going to drag him down soon. It wouldn't be long before he couldn't function.

"We should go," Billy murmured, but the hand that had settled over Steve's shoulder injury stayed there. Even Billy stayed still, as if he was reluctant to move away, to be more than a couple of inches away from Steve. He could still sense injuries. He could see them when he closed his eyes and if he reached out with whatever the fuck had been done to him, he could feel them.

But he still felt like hiding from Steve.

"Billy--" Steve pressed a little closer to him, turned Billy's head up a little to look at him, look into his eyes again. "I don't really...I don't really know what's happening right now, but El told me that you said you loved me. I know I said it back there, but you need to hear it again--I love you. I do. We'll get through this together, just like before. Everything else might change but not--not us. Not how I feel." Steve cupped the blonde's cheek and kissed him gently then; he could taste the coppery tang of the blood that had dripped onto Billy's lips.

Steve pressed his forehead to Billy's, breathed him in. There was

blood, and sweat, but there was also the unmistakable scent of Billy, the boy whose skin he inhaled when they slept pressed against one another, and the scent was stronger than the death and musky dank earth surrounding them in the tunnels. "We have to move now, there could be more. We need to get to Hopper's cabin. They could look for us at the house."

Billy clenched his jaw and tried not to close his eyes, tried not to avoid Steve's eyes. He swallowed and listened, instead. His breathing became ragged as Steve spoke. How did Steve always know what Billy was thinking? Needing? Even after being gone for a week, Steve understood how he needed to be touched, knew the words he needed to hear. Billy had a difficult time feeling like he deserved this.

As their lips parted, Billy nodded and stepped back. He reached out and slid his hand into Steve's. He laced their fingers together and glanced around. Obviously, Billy didn't know where to go. That was Steve's role. He didn't hesitate, though, when they started moving again. He followed Steve with that same quietness that he had grown accustomed to in his cell, his room. He watched Steve, of course, but he kept his mouth shut and his thoughts to himself.

They hurried through the tunnels together, Steve holding onto him as he held the bat in his other hand. He struggled to remember where they were going, and even though so much of the tunnels looked the exact same, sometimes there were marks or things that Steve had noticed on his way down. If nothing else, they could get to the surface and go to his car from there. Steve wasn't aware how long he was first down there, trying to get to Billy; he suspected hours but, maybe it was even longer.

He reached what he thought was the point that he entered into the Upside-Down. It was basically impossible to tell aside from the fact that the thick membrane, now closed off, was a little lighter than other portions of the tunnel, as if light was trying to seep into the darkness.

"Let me stand on your shoulders, get--" Steve urged Billy down, still directed him to kneel since Billy was in a daze. He climbed onto Billy's shoulders and rocked precariously when Billy stood back up. Steve did his best to right himself as he tried to use the bat to hit the

membrane. It didn't move, at least not in the way that would help them. If anything, Steve swore that it looked a little thicker, like it was trying to purposely trap them in there.

Steve reached for his lighter in his pocket, nearly falling off Billy's shoulders, who gripped him harder. He lit the edge of the bat on fire, kept the lighter there so long he felt the flame burning his fingers. Once the end of the bat was lit, he raised it as high as he could and rest it against the ceiling of the tunnel to break them free.

Slowly, the membrane began to peel back, coiling away from the heat and curling at the edges as the fire burned it. There was definite hissing, and the sudden pain to the tissue alerted the demodogs. Billy could hear them scrambling and closed his eyes. Honestly, when Steve and Billy finally escaped, when they got out of here, Billy was going to take a long look at leaving this fucking town and going back to the beach. If that was even possible at this point.

As the membrane finally popped free, Billy could feel Steve lifting himself up and over the dirt that covered the tunnels. Billy's eyes flickered to the side, and as the first dog-like creature charged, he dodged to the side. He stared at the slick looking creature and wondered what the fuck happened to cause all of this. The bus. The trunk. The pool. Everything seemed to be out to get them, and he was so *tired* of it. He was tired and all he wanted to do was curl up in bed with Steve (and maybe, just fucking maybe, actually *make love* to him for once).

The idea that he *wanted* to make love to Steve made Billy pause long enough for it to be a mistake. He winced as the thing jumped and latched onto his shoulder. The pain was bright and sudden, like fire, and it took Billy a moment to concentrate, to dig himself into the creature's body and snap its neck from the inside. It fell to the ground and, as it fell, all of the puncture wounds underneath the mess of blood stitched themselves back together.

"Gimme a hand, Harrington," Billy grouched and felt, for just a second, like himself again. He reached up, hand outstretched, his lips quirking into a tiny grin.

Steve had let out a sharp cry when the demodog latched onto Billy,

ready to dive back into the tunnels, and then he was momentarily stunned when Billy was just alright, no better and no worse from the attack. It made him feel sick to his stomach all over again, but seeing Billy smirk up at him eased that feeling--just a little. Steve couldn't help but look around for any more of the demodogs as he leaned far over the hole he created and reached his arms out to Billy.

It was a fucking struggle pulling the guy up. Steve was no lightweight himself, and he wasn't exactly weak, but the guy was all fucking heavy muscle, so by the time Billy had pushed himself up and out along the wall, Steve was panting with exertion. His car was across the field, so he hadn't been terribly far off.

Steve waited there though, refused to move as he looked back down into the pit. The membrane was closing, very slowly, and he could see the shadows of those creatures dancing against the light that remained in the tunnel. They were still down there, but could they get out? Had they already all gotten out in the lab or just the one? How many of them survived? He stood there, unsure how long, with his brow furrowed in thought. Steve jerked his head up finally when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Billy's eyes were on him and his hand tightened on Steve's shoulder. Although, if Billy was honest with himself, he was a bit dazed, too. He hadn't been outside in more than week. He hadn't seen anything but white walls, water, and blackness. The air was crisp and clean and smelled of trees and grass. He never realized that he took that for granted. He never realized that the feeling of grass on his bare feet was *good*.

Normal things simply weren't... normal after what Billy went through.

And even though Steve was covered in dirt, grime, and muck, he was more fucking beautiful than Billy could ever remember him being. He took a shaky step back away from Steve and dropped his hand. He still loved him. God, he loved Steve, but what happened now? Steve had watched him *kill* someone, and Billy had seen the fear there. He had watched Steve become terrified of *him*, even though Billy would never touch him like that (or not touch him, as it were).

Finally, Billy opened his mouth, but his words were rough.

“Ready?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Steve lingered for a moment, watched the membrane slowly melt back together, and his entire body was taut as he moved back to his car with Billy. Steve felt truly fucking exhausted, and when they got to his car, he slid into the passenger seat, trusted Billy to drive faster than him anyway. Steve slumped into the seat and as the smell of the demodog filled the car, Steve wrinkled his nose in disgust. “I need a fucking shower,” Steve grumbled and tried to settle back into the seat.

Steve jerked upright though a moment later, “We need to get the kids out of my place, make sure we’re not being followed and get them out before we head over to Hopper’s. Just get us there as quick as we can before the fuckers catch on.” Steve and Billy weren’t that far from their winter break at school. It would give them time to figure this shit out, figure out what they were going to do.

Steve felt the car sped up, and even though he wanted to try to relax now that they were out of the fucking lab and the fucking tunnels, he couldn’t help but lift up his hands that were resting on his knees, unaware of Billy’s concerns that Steve would finally reject him. Steve frowned, his digits slowly twitching as he stared there. Had he imagined it...?

24. Chapter 24

Summary for the Chapter:

Well deserved flangst and smut on the way!

It was strange not driving his own car. It was strange not shifting, but it was also strange just *being* in a car. Billy ignored the speed limits as he drove, and his eyes were intent on the road. He could see Steve through his peripheral vision and he wanted to reach over to touch him, but he was still fucking scared. Billy hated that. He hated that he was scared, that he wasn't sure what to do next, that he wasn't *confident* in his decisions or thoughts.

Once Billy pulled the BMW into the driveway, his tension melted away slightly at the fact that there were no vans, no cars parked outside the house. He yanked the key out and climbed out of the car. It was then that the exhaustion hit him. The lack of food. The constant healing and the extra strain of having healed Steve. He swayed and then leaned back against the BMW. He couldn't. Not now. They needed to get moving, needed to get the fuck away from the house.

"Go get them," Billy looked toward the front door and didn't move. Maybe he could play this off. Maybe Steve wouldn't notice. He reached up and rubbed the dried blood off of his upper lip.

Steve looked at Billy intently for a moment, and even though he knew he was wasting time, he was hesitant to leave him. "If you see anybody...I don't want you to wait for me." Steve knew Billy wouldn't listen, wasn't in his nature anyway, but Steve's concern for Billy's safety was in *his* nature. If shit went sideways, he didn't want Billy to feel guilty. Steve didn't wait for an answer when he jogged back up to the house and opened the door.

He could hear the kids screaming and shouting at each other as he walked into the living room. Nobody noticed him for several moments as he watched them argue with one another, Dustin and Mike in some sort of shouting match. "Hey-"

Nobody looked his way and Steve cleared his throat. He was way too tired for this shit. He just wanted a fucking hot shower and to sleep a day. He stamped his foot once and there was still nothing before he yelled in frustration, “HEY, HEY, KNOCK IT OFF YOU LITTLE SHITS!”

As soon as Steve entered into the living room, Max whipped her head around. She sucked in a sharp breath at the blood and muck on him, and she made her own assumptions of where he had been. She stumbled off of the couch and stomped up to him. Furious, she shoved her hand against his stomach.

“We woke up and you weren’t here!” She practically shouted, “You weren’t here and your car was gone and I thought--we thought--” tears clouded her vision and she pushed Steve again, but it was weaker this time. “You left us and I--I have *no one* , Steve.” She reached up and wiped her cheeks.

However, as Max heard the door open again, she stepped to the side and froze. Billy had slipped the door shut behind him, his grip on the handle enough to make his knuckles white. He looked like *shit* , but all Max could think about was that he was here. He was standing in Steve’s house again, even if he looked gaunt and and exhausted.

“Billy!” Her shriek jerked Billy’s head up and his eyes widened as she catapulted forward and threw her arms around his waist. He grunted as he fell back against the door, but he settled a hand on her head.

Billy wouldn’t admit to Steve that being outside alone had started to terrify him. Every noise had him jumping, and every car that passed or lights that came over the house made him want to throw up. He couldn’t be out there. Not right now, and at least, not alone. He tipped his head back against the door and tangled his fingers into Max’s hair. He could feel her crying against him. Her shoulders shook as her fingers dug into the hospital scrubs.

“I never thought I’d say this,” Dustin stared at the three of them, “But I’m glad to see you, Billy. Also, you both kinda look like you’ve been hit by trucks.”

Billy chuckled and resisted the urge to slide down onto the floor. He

was on the same page as Dustin, though. He never thought he'd be happy to walk into Steve's house to see all the little shits bundled up on the floor in sleeping bags. It solidified to him that Steve was definitely the mother hen of this group.

"Your stomach is growling," Max grumbled against him and Billy hummed in response. He wasn't going to tell her that he hadn't eaten in days, that all he could think about was curling up against Steve and sleeping for weeks. His eyes closed and little flashes of energy moved around behind his eyelids--the kids. The kids' energy. Shit. How fucked up was he at this point?

Steve's, though--Steve's was rolling and anxious. He still had some injuries that Billy was too weak to fix, but they weren't like before.

Steve wanted to weakly protest that he had left a note in his haze, though he found it difficult to explain exactly what happened. Steve had his suspicions that somehow it was due to Billy, since he felt a similar sensation when Billy healed him, but Steve didn't feel comfortable voicing that now. It wasn't the time.

The kids chattered and shouted questions happily, and Steve felt overwhelmed, when El slowly walked up to Billy. She was careful and guarded, more so than usual when she approached him, stood behind Max. "Brother." It was a statement as much as it was an accusation and she extended her arm, revealed the 11 on her arm.

It was one word, but then you could have heard a pin drop in the room. All the kids knew what that meant. Steve knew they would have questions, frantic, and never ending, and it would bowl Billy over into some sort of episode. El stood there, transfixed on Billy when Steve cleared his throat.

"We don't have time right now, people could be coming. Everybody get their shit as fast as they can and we're just dropping everybody off at Mike's house. El is coming with us back to the cabin." The fact that they needed to hide *now* was heavily implied. Nobody moved for several seconds before Steve yelled at them again, clapped his hands, and the kids sprang into action.

Steve moved to the entryway and glanced at Billy, Max still holding

onto him and El stood there. He sighed before he raced upstairs to grab what he could of his own things and what Billy left behind in the guest room.

Billy was able to tune out the shouting. It was easy considering he had tuned out his own screaming for a couple of days. He didn't mind that Max was holding onto him, but when El walked up and said 'brother' and showed him her arm, he stiffened. Bile rolled in his gut because he *knew* the shit they had done to her. He knew what she had been through, and she was so much younger than him. She didn't deserve that shit.

"Brother?" Max blinked and looked back at the number on El's wrist. Alarmed, she glanced at Billy and then grabbed his hands. When she yanked them down, her breath caught in her throat at the tattooed number on Billy's wrist. Tears glistened in her eyes and she tried to swallow down her questions, but she couldn't help herself. "What did they do to you?"

Billy tried to keep it together. He really did. His fingers curled against Max's hands and he shook his head a little. He didn't want to talk, especially not about that. Slowly, he tugged his hands away from Max and patted her on the shoulder. Instead of talking, he slid away from her and headed into the kitchen.

Max was Max, though, and she followed.

"Billy, you can *talk* to me," Max insisted as Billy opened the fridge and grabbed a coke. She bit her lower lip and slumped as he popped it open and took a small drink. Before she could insist on him talking, he set the can to the side and rummaged through the cabinet. He came out with some crackers and looked at her.

"Go get your things," Billy murmured. He opened the package and ate one of the crackers. She stayed there, though, staring at him.

"Why won't you tell me?" She fidgeted. "And why does El think you're her *brother*?"

Billy shrugged and went silent again. Max hated it. She was used to Billy snapping and getting irritated and *responding*. She turned on her

heel and stomped into the living room to gather her things. Billy sagged into a chair as soon as she left and curled his fingers around the coke can. His eyes flickered to El and then away.

He was trying to keep himself together. Falling apart in front of the kids wasn't a good plan.

El watched Billy closely as she approached him and sat in the chair across from him. She had met Billy on several occasions, more in passing really, and she just happened to be one of the other children that Steve occasionally babysat. Billy had never seen her at school with the other children, but she was a strange child, and it wasn't Billy's place to pry into how the Sheriff raised his kid. A lot more made sense now, including the quiet and other worldly air that always surrounded her.

She placed a hand on her chest, "Eleven." She was so young, had such a different way of thinking and being, and it suggested that she was in that place much longer than Billy. Steve told Billy that El had closed the Gate, but a lot of that just washed over him until he had been an experiment himself in that place. What the Gate was, those monsters in action--people and demodogs.

She, like Billy, trusted the others to gather whatever she brought with her. And apparently Billy would be coming back to the cabin with her. Steve had never been there but she could direct him. Her curls framed her face, stuck up in different directions from sleep. They both could hear Steve shouting at the other kids in the background as she blinked her large eyes at him.

"Brother." She said again, more firmly this time, and reached out for him. She laid out her arm across the table towards Billy, her wrist facing up to him as she offered a small smile.

Billy didn't have the energy it took to stiffen as Eleven sat down next to him. He watched her wearily, his eyes constantly moving between the coke in his hands and the hand that she stretched out on the table. His heart felt like it was breaking all over again, like what he had been through wasn't *just* him. It was weird knowing someone else had gone through it, but it was also... comforting, in some fucked up way. He hated that she experienced it, hated that she had

to go through an ounce of that pain.

Eleven made sense now, though.

Eleven didn't seem like just a number anymore. Not to Billy.

"Thirteen?" Billy's answer was uncertain and something deep inside of him ached as he slid his arm out and turned his hand over to show her the numbers. The tattoo didn't hurt. Not like everything else did, but it made him feel less like a human being. It was hard to think of Eleven that way, though, because she didn't *seem* like an experiment. Maybe he was being too hard on himself?

El grasped his forearm though, held his arm and smiled as if she sensed his uncertainty. "Hi, Thirteen," she said, a little breathy with emotion as she smiled wider. She was just a child, more so than himself, and it was easy to see why Steve was so protective over all of them. Nobody deserved any of that, of this.

Steve held two bags as he entered the kitchen. he was silent for several moments as the pair looked at each other. He hated to disrupt whatever was going on, but he cleared his throat softly, "We have to go now. We don't know if they might come here."

El broke the hold first, let go of Billy's forearm and patted it gently, reassuringly, before she moved into the living room to take her place with the other children. Steve stood in the doorway, shifted from one foot to the other. "You can talk to her later, when we're safe." Steve said quietly.

Billy pressed his lips together as El grasped his arm, as she held him, and his breath stuttered in his chest. He wasn't sure why. El was just a little girl, but to have her approach him? Talk to him like he wasn't some...fucking experiment or monster? It helped him feel less ostracized.

Steve's disruption was almost comforting. He wasn't sure what to say to her. Rather, he wasn't sure *how* to say what he wanted to say. It probably would have come out fucked up and he'd be embarrassed. He watched her get up and leave. When she was gone, his gaze moved to Steve.

With a small nod, Billy stood up, coke in hand, and walked toward Steve. He paused when he was within arm's reach and seemed nervous--like he wanted to say something, *do something* . Yet, the memory of Steve screaming at him, or his face as Billy killed the guy, flashed in his eyes and he bit back whatever he might have said or done.

Steve shouldn't have to deal with that. Billy was fucked up before. Hell, he *thought* he was fucked up before. That was laughable now. He tightened his grip on the coke can and didn't move. He wasn't sure what to do. He was fucking *lost* , more than he had been at home or in the lab, and he was with *Steve* . He shouldn't *feel this way* .

Steve swallowed and strode towards Billy. He dropped the bags on the ground for a moment before he wordlessly wrapped his arms around the blonde's waist and dropped his forehead to his shoulder. When he thought Billy was gone, Steve felt empty, like he was never going to be full or alive ever again. And to have Billy back in his home, if only briefly, but like *this* , it broke his fucking heart.

He didn't know what to do or say to make Billy feel really better, but he knew that showing Billy how much he missed him physically--that might be something Billy appreciated. "I missed you so much, asshole...you nearly missed Christmas." Steve let out a small laugh against Billy's neck and tightened his grip a little. Steve really thought Billy walked away from him and out of his life, because Steve was irreparably fucked up. To learn that Billy was there, being tortured while Steve was off pissing and moaning... he kicked himself for it.

"I'm so..." Steve wanted to say sorry, but it felt flat compared to what Billy experienced. Maybe he could have gotten to him sooner. Even though Steve had no idea how he could have accomplished that, it being his fault somehow still seemed fairly logical. Steve didn't pull away but he lifted his head, looking into Billy's eyes. His own were shining a little as he gave another laugh, feeling unsure of himself and stupid, "Sorry, I know I need a shower."

Billy felt a wash of cold over his body as Steve wrapped his arms around him. It still felt like a dream--as if those monsters still had him and maybe, just maybe, he was in the tank. Maybe he would

wake up and still be strapped to the table. He knew, though, that it wasn't reasonable. He had run through those tunnels. He had been pulled out by Steve and he had driven the BMW. Max hugged him. El spoke to him. Would all of that had happened in a dream?

Instead of wondering, Billy hesitantly put his arms around Steve's shoulders. He curled his fingers of his free hand into Steve's ruined sweater and shuddered. The other still held the coke, but the can was slipping. His whole body burned to touch Steve, to move his fingers beneath his sweater, to make sure he was *real* . He knew now wasn't the time, but he *yearned* .

The mention of Christmas and the comment about needing a shower only made Billy squeeze him harder. He wasn't sure what to say and he felt stupid. He felt really fucking stupid. Usually, he'd have a comeback. A response. But nothing came to mind and it *tore* at him. He swallowed and offered a tiny smile.

"You said we have to hurry and you two are all *hugging* ," Dustin whined and grunted when Max punched his shoulder. "What!? He said we have to go!"

"I will break your face," Max threatened and Lucas raised his eyebrows.

"She's serious. She will," He shrugged and Dustin gaped at him.

"You won't even *defend* me?!" Dustin glared, but it was half-hearted.

"He's hurting," Will commented, his voice quiet but firm. The small gang of kids turned their eyes to him. "Both of them. Just... give them a minute."

"If we die, it's your fault," Dustin shot at them and walked toward the door.

Steve could hear the kids and exhaled softly, Dustin was right though. Not the time. Steve offered a small smile in return and he squeezed Billy's waist once before he bent down to snatch the bags up. Steve turned on his heel and marched to the front door, snapped as he passed them, "Well, move it already, Jesus Christ, we don't

have all goddamn day!”

Steve thought about taking both cars, but was too hesitant to let Billy drive by himself. He shoved as much as he could in the trunk before he paused for a moment as the kids struggled to all fit in the back. It was tight with the four of them, but six was a struggle. Steve watched them before he softly exclaimed and raced around to the back, opened the tool shed and grabbed the bat there. Just in case. Just...in case.

When he came back around, Steve could have sworn Billy looked relieved to see him again, but it was clear the kids were all looking at the bat. Steve made no comment of it as he got into the driver's seat.

The kids argued with each other before Steve hollered at them, turning around in his seat for them to just deal with it already, it was a short ride. Eventually Max let out a frustrated cry, squished into the left hand side before she slid out of the car, slammed the door and climbed onto Billy's lap in the passenger side. She looked petulant and dared anyone to challenge her. No one did.

Steve started the car, already all of his nerves fried beyond comprehension when Dustin piped up from under Will. “Dude, you really smell. Like, *really* smell.” Steve grumbled and gripped the steering wheel tighter, jerked to a stop in front of Mike's house. He trusted the kids to tell Nancy and the others what they could. The kids piled out except for El, and Max slowly slid off Billy's lap. The door was open but she just stood there, staring at him under red eyelashes.

Billy didn't seem to mind that Max was that close, although he did keep the bloodier part of his scrubs away from her. He hesitated when the group of kids finally left and Max stared at him. His stomach twisted and he parted his lips as he tried to find something to say, *anything* to say to her. The other kids wandered inside, left the four of them at the car.

It was impossible to lie to Max. She was good at seeing through him, especially as they got closer. Granted, it was also hard for him to lie. It was hard for him to brush it under the rug with her because she was the *only* family he really had left, and they weren't even blood

related.

“I--” Billy paused and chewed the inside of his cheek. As soon as some of the skin split, it knit back together. He closed his eyes and shuddered. “I’m not okay, Max. I--I’m not. I...” He would be okay, though. Eventually, he would be able to breathe again without feeling like *this* . Completely fucking helpless.

She surged forward and hugged him around the neck, hugged him fiercely. “Just...shut the hell up, you’re still my asshole big brother.” All the kids knew that Billy had been tortured, heard it the other night, but to see the same tattoo that she caught glimpses of on El’s wrist...that meant something different. Billy was something different now. And Max may not know exactly what that was or all the details, but he was now a member of the Party and her big brother. Billy wormed his way into those spots unintentionally, but he was there nevertheless.

Max pulled away slowly, fidgeted and her eyes bright with unshed tears. She wasn’t going to lose it in front of him, she refused to do that. “Just...we can talk later, just stay safe for now. I’m going to see you soon.” It was hard, leaving him so soon after getting Billy back, but it needed to happen. So Max took a step back and then another before she turned and ran into the Wheeler’s home.

Steve let the car idle silently before he started it and started driving in the direction of Hawkins’ forest. It was silent in the car for the most part, tense now that the majority of the party was back at Mike’s. El openly stared at Billy, seemingly fascinated, and would sometimes quietly pipe up and tell Steve to take a turn or two.

It was the weekend, but El wasn’t supposed to come home for several hours, so it wasn’t surprising to Steve that he was the only car parked out front. Hopper was probably still at the Sheriff’s station. Steve really hoped he was filled in enough so that he didn’t have to explain anything. El silently got out the car, grabbed her very small bag, and stepped over a tripwire in the front before she entered the cabin, knowing they would follow. Suddenly everything hit Steve and he just felt so exhausted, everything inside him aching as he sighed heavily.

It had been difficult to part with Max. Her and Steve had been the main reasons that Billy had kept it together for so long in the lab. Granted, he had only lasted a couple of days, but it was something. It was then that Billy was pulled out of his thoughts as El got out and began walking toward the cabin. He watched her quietly and didn't realize that he was touching the tattoo on his wrist with the opposite hand. His thumb brushed over the number.

At Steve's sigh, Billy glanced over. He watched him and thought about the night at the middle school. The dance. Billy driving off after seeing Steve watch Nancy. If only he had just *stayed* there. Maybe this wouldn't have happened.

Billy waited for only a second before reaching out to gently touch Steve's arm. He swallowed down the nervousness in his gut and leaned across the seat to press his lips to Steve's cheek. It was light, but it was there. He leaned back into his seat and looked at the cabin.

"Ready?" Billy asked, although, if he was honest with himself, he was probably asking that of both of them--not just Steve.

Steve arched an eyebrow in surprise but smiled softly at Billy's question. "Yeah, let's go." Steve's body screamed in protest when he finally got out of the car, grabbed the bags he managed to shove some personal items into, and stepped over the wire. Ever since he discovered everything about what happened to Nancy, heading into the Upside Down, Steve hated the woods. He didn't venture very far beyond his own backyard, but he had no choice now and pushed away that anxiety as he headed into the cabin.

Steve was unsure what the sleeping arrangements would be, there seemed to be two bedrooms, but one of them had to be Hopper's. Frankly the floor might have to do in a pinch. Steve knew he could do worse, though he idly wondered how much things had changed in the past year. He could imagine himself making a quip that Steve Harrington didn't sleep on the floor. Then again, Steve Harrington had to take what he could get.

He'd never been inside the cabin before and glanced around before he spotted a bathroom. Steve could have cried in relief. Steve mumbled that he was going to shower as he dropped the bags on the

floor, uncaring, as he immediately hurried inside the bathroom and gently closed the door. Steve turned the hot water on full blast and started to strip before he cursed, walked back out to grab one of the bags with spare clothes, and hurried back to the bathroom. Steve tore at his clothes and maybe some of his memories too, down there in those tunnels, pinned under a demodog.

Billy had followed Steve into the cabin, but he had been quiet. He watched Steve move to the bathroom and then return. He wasn't sure if he should follow, if he should offer to join him. It felt... wrong. He was sure it shouldn't feel that way, but there was, standing in the living room and wishing he had the fucking guts to follow Steve into the bathroom. He closed his eyes and breathed out slowly.

He could do this, right? If Steve wanted to be left alone, he'd say so. Billy could use the excuse that he wanted to look for injuries, right? It sounded stupid--the idea that he needed an excuse to be close to Steve, but... Billy clenched his hands and then walked to the door to the bathroom. He knocked gently and ached because he was *knocking on the fucking door* .

"Steve...?" Billy chewed at his cheek again. "Do you want..." He trailed off and closed his eyes. What was he even asking at this point? He wanted to be with Steve, but he was also terrified of rejection.

Billy fucking Hargrove. Terrified. Neil would approve.

Steve was ready to step inside the shower when he heard Billy outside. He sounded...scared. That was what unnerved Steve. Steve didn't know how to make things right, how to set Billy at ease, but he had badly missed him, so Steve went to the door. It wasn't a large bathroom and Steve hid behind the door when he slowly opened it and tugged Billy inside before he closed the door again.

He was naked, and while it wasn't even close to his first time being naked with Billy, it *felt* like it and Steve felt suddenly self-conscious. Billy was even more apprehensive though, distraught and quiet. Steve tried to give him a little smile and not do anything stupid like cover himself, like Billy had peeped in on him.

"Do you...wanna shower together and watch me look like a person

again? Please?” Steve inquired, leaving it open ended. There was dried blood, grime, and demodog all over his body, and he looked like some sort of crude finger painting. Steve itched to have it off his skin, wash away the reminders of jaws and his own shrieking.

Billy held his breath when Steve spoke and then nodded his head. Yes. He wanted to touch Steve again, to feel him, but he also wanted to get clean. His skin was covered in his blood from the earlier experiments and the demodog that had grabbed him. Steve was already naked, so Billy felt less paranoid to tug the scrubs off of his body.

Of course, those assholes had experimented until he started to heal immediately, so there were shiny scars decorating his skin from when the ability started *after* they had their fun. It had been a relief when he started to heal at such a fast rate. Some of those cuts, bruises, and broken bones had been a pain in the ass.

His hands ended up in front of him and he was *fidgiting* .

Steve stepped inside the shower and hissed when the spray hit his back. He couldn't stop himself from glancing down, watched the water turn a soft grey, and Steve was mesmerized and a little disgusted as he gently pulled Billy under the shower with him. The blood started to wash off Billy's body, almost like it melted away, and Steve looked into Billy's eyes, a soft smile on his lips.

“A little hot water will make us both human again, huh?” It was stupid and Steve felt really unsure of himself. To have Billy so unsure, not cocky or teasing or pushing him--it got under Steve's skin. He wrapped his arms around Billy's waist and pulled them both under to stand under the spray. Steve looked into Billy's eyes for several moments before he lowered his head to Billy's shoulder.

Billy let Steve pull him. He flinched when the water touched him and forced his body to calm down. It was a shower. It wasn't the tank and it wasn't the hoses they had turned on him when he needed to be cleaned at the lab. He closed his eyes at Steve's comment and felt whatever had been keeping him together *fracture* . When he opened his eyes again, Steve was looking at him, watching him, before he was leaning against his body.

A distraction--that's what Billy needed. He needed something to do to keep himself put together. He closed his eyes again and let his mind wrap itself around Steve's energy. He searched through it until he found his remaining injuries. It didn't hurt or strain him just to look. It felt strange, yes, but it wasn't the pull it normally had while healing.

Through prodding, Billy found the injury on Steve's calf--from when he had gotten dragged. He slid his hands up and touched Steve's cheek and his neck. Gently, he pushed him away from his shoulder.

"Just--let me?" It didn't really make sense, but Billy was a wreck, so it didn't bother him. He sank down to his knees and slid his fingers over Steve's knee, above the injury. He began to slide his fingers down, and as he did, he pressed his forehead to Steve's hip. As his fingers neared the injury, that same warmth that dwelled inside of Billy, that had roped into Steve after the chill of their kiss, slid into the cuts and gouges and began to stitch the muscle and skin together.

Steve was confused for a moment when Billy lowered himself and he wanted to protest, he really did. Billy didn't have to take care of him, it would likely heal on its own with maybe a little scarring. It didn't bother Steve, but maybe it bothered Billy. Steve shuddered hard and bit his lower lip when it began, and he felt that warmth envelop him for a third time. It confirmed for him it was probably Billy who pulled him down into the tunnels, though Steve wasn't sure how.

Part of him was upset with Billy for that, even if it was likely unintentional. Being down there again was fucking terrifying and it consumed most of Steve's nightmares. And then to actually see one of the fucking dogs again, to get attacked, and think he was going to die--he couldn't think about that now. Couldn't be *upset* even until later, when Billy was more himself.

"You don't have to do that, you know, it'll heal ok." Came Steve's soft response, even as he could see that the teeth marks were gone and he felt some relief at that. A physical, tangible erasure of that place from his body. Steve still didn't know what really happened down there, and part of him wondered if it was some sort of dream or vivid panic attack that just gave him the strength to kill one of those things. He couldn't even remember all of it. It wasn't Steve's first time thinking

he was a little crazy, a combination of constant sleep deprivation and panic. Steve gently lowered his hand to Billy's hair, into his curls, the blonde hair now coming to light as the blood washed down the drain.

"It's my fault it's there," Billy replied quietly. He waited until the last wound healed. Instead of getting back up, Billy eased himself back onto his ass. He would get up when the burning in his head stopped. He reached up and wiped his hand over the blood that had seeped out below his nose. He hadn't met Steve's eyes yet.

If he hadn't left the school and if he hadn't pulled over to confront Neil, Billy wouldn't have given them the chance to grab him. Granted, he was sure that they would have eventually tried, but maybe if he hadn't, they wouldn't have succeeded. He tilted his legs together and brought them up to his chest.

"That should be the last of your...the injuries," Billy finally looked up at Steve. He wished he could just be himself, be *okay*. He wanted to say and do things that he normally would, but there was that fear in the back of his mind. That fear mixed with Brenner's fascination with how his healing abilities connected with his emotional state? That had fucked him up worse than any of the physical torture. It had been the same with Neil, though. He had always bounced back from the beatings, but the words were always present in his head.

Steve wondered if maybe Billy knew that somehow the blonde had pulled Steve to the lab. The question gnawed at him from Billy's enigmatic statement and he wanted to argue with Billy; he certainly felt angry at the possibility, even if he couldn't imagine Billy doing it on purpose. But watching Billy sit on the floor like that made Steve's heart ache and he wanted to cry just fucking looking at the guy. So instead he worked his jaw and looked away for a moment before he lowered himself against the back of the tub. It was awkward, and nothing like the last time they'd been on a shower floor together.

Steve watched Billy for a long time, and the other kept glancing in his direction but refused to make full eye contact with him. It suddenly dawned on Steve that it wasn't just Billy's fear of what happened to him, but that he was still worried about *them*. He had tried to tell Billy down there in the tunnels, but Billy looked like when he backed himself into the corner of the lab, lost, after he

witnessed Steve's horror, that Steve wasn't able to get the right words out.

He moved forward quickly and seized the blonde's lips, sucking his lower lip until Billy opened his mouth a little, just enough for him to slid his tongue in. Steve reached his arms under Billy's and pressed his hands into his strong back, pulling Billy back over him as Steve spread his legs to accommodate him. Steve kissed over his face slowly before he held Billy on top of him, the cold tub floor making him shiver. It was the only question he would ask, his voice soft, "He deserved it...didn't he?"

The sudden movement made Billy flinch, but as soon as Steve's mouth was on his, his muscles began to relax. Feeling Steve inside of him, even if it was just kissing, his tongue exploring his mouth, made tears burn into his eyes. He wasn't sure how Steve knew what he needed, but Steve *did* . He gasped as Steve broke the kiss and pulled him over. His hands planted next to Steve's sides on the tub so that he wasn't lying his entire weight on top of his body. His breath became ragged as Steve kissed over his face--his cheeks, his forehead. Anywhere he could reach.

At the question, Billy tensed and finally caught Steve's gaze. He watched him and wondered how much he should tell him. He wanted to make Steve understand. He wanted Steve to *know* why he had done that, even if it was unintentional at first. It felt like it was the first time that Billy *wanted* to talk.

"He's the one who threatened to kill you and Max," Billy glanced away again and chewed at the inside of his cheek. "If I didn't... If I didn't do what they wanted me to, he'd threaten to do--do *things* --to you." He almost choked on his words and fought withdrawing from Steve. "He thought...thought it was great that I healed faster if he talked about it. He liked hammers."

The last statement was mumbled, and maybe his voice cracked, but he tried to hide it.

Steve inhaled sharply and looked up at the ceiling, his hand gently traveled up and down Billy's back. He could imagine that--somebody talking about Steve and Billy's temper flaring right up when he was

challenged. But of course, Billy's powers wouldn't ever work if he was just whole and well, Billy had to be *hurt*, ripped apart, for him to use whatever they did to him.

He felt the muscles there, and Steve was unsure of just how many times they tried to physically and mentally break Billy. Maybe one day Billy would tell him, but Steve wasn't going to ask today. He wasn't about to press the blonde like that, but he did press a firm kiss to his forehead. Steve drew Billy physically close to him, so that he actually was flush against Steve. It was awkward, but it wasn't like Billy's weight would crush him and Steve couldn't take it--especially not right then.

"Then you did what you had to do, babe. And that's all I need. I haven't stopped loving you, I swear." Steve whispered. He pushed back some of Billy's wet hair from off his face. "Just be with me right now, do what you need to do with me." Cry, yell at Steve, touch him, whatever Billy wanted, Steve would give him.

Billy breathed in sharply as their skin touched, as his body finally settled against Steve's with his gentle encouragement. It reminded him of his dreams--the ones that gave him brief reprieve from what the men were doing. He shifted so he could rest his cheek against Steve's collarbone. It wasn't really comfortable, but he didn't care because he was *touching* him. He would deal with being uncomfortable if it meant being with Steve.

"I dreamed a lot about you," Billy decided to finally admit. This was okay. He was giving little bits of information and it was... okay. He now understood why Steve did better with questions than just talking, though. It was hard to sift through everything that had happened, everything that was said and done to him. He wasn't sure he could handle going into detail without questions, but giving Steve enough so he understood that Billy still *loved* him was important. He knew that.

"I--I looked forward to that the most. If I passed out or whenever they let me sleep, you were always there," Billy finally relaxed his arms so his hands weren't pressed against the tub and reached up to touch Steve's shoulder. He stroked along the skin gently. "I think... I think two of them were--weren't dreams--and I don't know..." He didn't

know how or why. They just weren't, and they had obviously reached Steve. One through El, and the other...? He wasn't sure. He just *needed* Steve so desperately that he had ended up in his room.

That all but confirmed it for Steve and he looked up at the ceiling again as his eyes filled with tears. He couldn't say anything to Billy. It wasn't the time. It wasn't on purpose. And even if it would give Steve more nightmares, somehow he managed to get Billy out of there with it. It would have been damn near impossible otherwise. Instead of replying, he turned his head down to kiss over Billy's face slowly. Steve wasn't even sure he could hear more, not without getting upset himself.

"They all know, not just Max. Dustin and the rest of the kids too, I guess, and Nancy and Jonathan. She noticed that I wasn't...doing well, and we talked about it." Steve wasn't sure how Billy would feel about that, even though they discussed it. "She was okay with it, I mean, I guess anyway. The kids too. They all saw...it was hard. With you gone, I mean." Steve's voice softened.

Billy went a little taut on top of Steve. He was a private person in general, so knowing that *all of them* knew? It was like a knife in his damned gut. He wouldn't be able to get away from the pity or the trepidation or them treating him like he's made of glass. His fingers curled against Steve's shoulder. The one with the tattoo stayed on the tub, off to the side.

"I'm sorry," Billy murmured. "I saw how... you looked. You were crying." It was his fault, too. Shit, he hated that. He knew Steve would tell him that it was okay, but Billy had done enough damage to the people who cared about him. This was just piling extra on top of it. "But I--what I said? I do. I just wasn't sure..." Billy hadn't known if he was going to actually make it out of the lab, and he remembered the terror in that. He remembered being scared that Steve wouldn't know how he felt.

"I love you, Steve," Billy swallowed down the urge to be sick. "I do. I fucking do."

But Steve smiled brightly at him and kissed him slowly, gently squeezing his legs around Billy's sides. "Me too, asshole...I just..."

Steve actually laughed then and groaned a little and covered his face. He pulled back his hands before Billy did it for him, and he wasn't upset, Steve was still smiling.

"That night and the last time we were in the shower, I guess, I really...I really wanted to say something and I just...I don't know. I felt so stupid. I kinda..." Steve supposed it didn't really matter now. "I believe all that stupid shit, fate and all that. And I just felt like...I was pressuring you into this. We started having like...shit, a relationship without dating and then everything was just so strong." Steve's voice dropped a little, his smile faltering. "I just didn't want to freak you out, and then you didn't show, and I was *sure* I did freak you out, and then there was a--a note? From you, saying goodbye. And I just...I lost it. I was sure...it was me, because I'm--well, me."

Steve swallowed softly. It felt strange to have it out in the open but it was all true. All how he felt. He loved Billy and that despair when Billy was gone was so palpable, everybody just knew.

"So, I guess it's kinda my fault they all know. I didn't...mean for it to happen but I'm not sorry, either."

Billy may have been tortured. He may have spent days without eating. He may have begged to *die*, but he *knew* one thing: he loved Steve Harrington. That never left him. Not when he was in the tank. Not when they were tearing him open. The thought that Steve believed he would leave him astounded Billy, but he also recognized that he was *shit* at communication. He showed a lot through touch, and it seemed that Steve rode a lot on words.

"You being you is *why* I love you," Billy muttered against Steve's skin. He hesitated at first, his fingers twitching. But then he reached out with the arm that had been tattooed and laced his fingers with Steve's. He squeezed his hand and pressed his cheek against Steve's chest. "And I don't care if they know anymore. What happened... puts that shit in perspective."

Having a group of people know that they were together, that they were an *item*, didn't come close to the thought of actually losing Steve or *dying*.

Steve sagged a little in relief under him and smiled again. "I know you don't believe it, but I always think you're too good for me. I know that we have both done shit, or whatever, it's just..." Steve sighed and thought for a moment before he smiled wider, bent down and pressed his forehead against Billy's, "You're fucking amazing Billy Hargrove, and now you're even more amazing."

He wrapped an arm around Billy's waist and pulled him a little closer in as he held the blonde tightly. "I know all of this is going...it's going to..." Steve struggled to think of the right words, struggled to convey what he wanted. Steve looked down at the tattooed wrist still holding his hand and squeezed softly. "Maybe you don't want to believe me, but you're one of 13 people on this whole fucking planet that are truly amazing, Billy, and no matter what happens, or what they did, *you* get to keep that."

Billy snorted at the comment about him being amazing, clearly disregarding it. However, at the mention of the number and being *amazing*, he swallowed and closed his eyes. He couldn't think of a way to respond--a proper way, anyway. Instead, he pressed his lips to Steve's chest and shifted so that more of their skin was touching. After a couple minutes of silence, Billy took in a shaky breath.

"At least they gave me something good, yeah?" He mumbled. "If anyone is hurt, I can heal them. I can... I can *help* ." Because as long as he could remember, he had always been destroying, tearing things and people down. It was only when Steve stepped in, *truly* stepped in that Billy had tried to change. Now? He could heal the people he cared about.

Steve nodded but then he's kissed Billy deeply again to emphasize the point; he wanted Billy to feel just how much Steve believed it--even if Billy didn't fully himself. Steve arched up slightly, his arms still wrapped around Billy as he sighed against his lips. "I missed you so fucking much," Steve whispered, kissing him a little deeper for a moment before breathing over Billy's lips. "I didn't know what to do without you, I couldn't sleep and I wasn't eating and--and--" Steve didn't want Billy to feel bad, that's not what he wanted. It hadn't been Billy's fault, and that's not what he wanted to convey.

"I don't think I ever cared about anything else or anyone so much in

my entire goddamn life, it's just you, Hargrove, just you." Steve kissed him again, softly sucking Billy's lower lip. Steve was always comfortable with his emotions, not always expressing them, but when he did, they were sincere and heartfelt. He could tell Billy felt that, even as he pressed as close as possible to the blonde boy, "It's *always* going to be you."

And Steve knew it. He couldn't predict the future, but there would never be another Billy Hargrove, not in Steve Harrington's lifetime.

As the scent and taste of Steve washed over him, Billy's heart felt like it was fucking *flying* . He hadn't felt this warm, this *okay* , in over a week. Despite feeling broken and so unlike himself, Steve wanted him. He could tell in the way Steve claimed his mouth, in the way that the kiss varied from just lips to Billy feeling absolutely owned by Steve's tongue. By the time Steve stopped kissing him, and even before he spoke, Billy's breathing was ragged and his eyes burned with tears.

Steve still wanted him .

Steve still loved him .

*Steve still **loved** him .*

And even though Billy wanted to be strong, wanted to be that person that was unaffected by what happened to him, he *wasn't* . He was scarred and shattered and terrified. He couldn't even stand alone outside without panicking, and that was *with* the ability to tear someone apart without even touching them.

Yet, that deep rooted fear of being rejected, of being alone, had been torn out and thrown to the wayside. Without that fear plaguing him, Billy felt the familiar warmth in his body that only Steve caused, that only *he* could fuel. And it didn't matter that Billy didn't really have a home because wherever Steve was, was his home.

" *Steve* ," Billy didn't even *care* how desperate he sounded. He knew it was okay because Steve wouldn't judge him. He wouldn't care that Billy felt like a puzzle that had been shaken up and tossed out. Billy pushed himself up on one hand and untangled the other from Steve's.

He ran his fingers along Steve's jaw, his cheek, and pushed some of his hair back. It took him a second to lean down, to press his lips over Steve's, but when he did, the warmth inside of him spread and he felt as if those shaken pieces were being slotted back together.

Steve kissed Billy back fiercely, moaning low into his mouth. He clutched onto Billy, felt his muscles shift in his back as the blonde kissed him, stole his breath out from under Steve until he felt dizzy and dazed. When Billy pulled back for just a moment, Steve smiled and let out a breathless laugh, only wanted to be apart for the barest of seconds before he placed heated kisses along Billy's face and down his neck.

Steve murmured his name and that he loved Billy against his pulse point, as if somehow it was going to reach his heart faster when Steve latched onto the skin there, sucking slowly before he dragged his tongue.

"I'll always come for you, Billy, I don't care if I have to go into the fucking jaws of hell to do it..." And it was what Steve felt like he'd done. Maybe it was Billy's pull that got him there, but he would have faced his greatest fear, *had faced it*, to protect Billy. "I love you so much..." And it was Billy's dream, but this was *real*. Steve was under Billy, touching him and whispering how deeply he felt.

Steve needed to show Billy, Billy who was so used to the physicality of love and pain. He half sat up and urged the blonde to move up, sit on the edge of the tub. Water would get all over the floor and Steve couldn't give a damn. He kissed Billy's collarbone, idly wondered what they had hurt. He could see freshly healing scars from wounds over Billy's body, ones that the blonde couldn't heal in time. Steve gently pressed Billy's legs apart as he knelt on the shower floor, kissing and sucking the soft skin there.

"I'm going to take you in my mouth again, and I *want* you to let go, babe, do what you need to do and don't worry about anything else..."

Billy was absolutely breathless by the time Steve encouraged him to sit on the rim of the bathtub. He pulled himself up onto it nervously and then watched Steve slide closer, watched his mouth brush over his legs and create small marks. It was hard to think like this, hard

not to let go like Steve wanted him to. After the week he had experienced, letting go sounded like heaven (if there was one).

He reached forward and slid his fingers through Steve's hair. As he did, he drug his nails gently over his scalp. The night that they had gotten drunk still replayed in his head--the first time he found out how sensitive Steve was to being touched like that. His fingers tightened gently, holding Steve just long enough for Billy to talk.

"Are you--are you sure...?" Because despite wanting everything Steve could give him, that asshole's words still swirled in his head: that he wasn't good enough, that he'd never be good enough, that Steve wouldn't want to touch him after they were through with him. He rolled his lower lip between his teeth and watched Steve quietly as he waited for his response.

Steve gasped softly and hissed through his teeth as Billy touched his hair, gently scraping his nails across his scalp. He pressed a hot kiss to Billy's wrist, sucking the skin there to muffle a moan as Steve gave a little nod in response and grinned up at him. "Of course I'm sure, and I'll take care of myself, so you only have to watch." They couldn't do much, not right now, not with how tense Billy was and how swept away Steve became, but Steve could give Billy this.

Steve flushed a little at that, maybe in a different situation he would have been really embarrassed, as he often was under Billy's watchful gaze, but Billy needed this right now. "I want you to watch me and let go." Steve leaned forward again and mouthed at Billy's chest. When he came to his first scar, he pressed his tongue there, dragged it tenderly, and he could feel Billy harden against his own chest pressed between the blonde's legs. "Just let me worship you, like before, that's what I want...." Steve seized one of Billy's nipples in his mouth, rolling it gently between his teeth as his fingers dug into Billy's hip.

Billy didn't have a verbal response for Steve. He could only watch as Steve sucked on his wrist and then moved his mouth to his chest. His hands fell from Steve's hair and settled on the rim of the bathtub. He curled his fingers there tightly, until his knuckles went white. It wasn't hard to do what Steve asked him to (told him?). His eyes stayed on Steve, even as his breath hitched and his back arched so

that he could get closer to Steve's mouth.

The fact that Steve was willing to touch the scars--the wounds he wasn't able to heal in time--made his body hot. Almost as hot as when he stood on the sand under the California sun, but this was bone deep. He had all of Steve's attention--his mind, his emotions, his body. It wasn't twenty four hours ago that he was sure he was going to never *see* Steve again, and suddenly he was in his arms and his mouth was on him.

Steve's name tumbled out of Billy's mouth as his teeth grazed his nipple. He twitched and sucked in a tiny breath. It was strange--when he closed his eyes, Steve's energy was bright and it *glittered* behind his eyelids. It wasn't a hum or a low throb like normal. Billy wasn't sure what they had done to him, and at this point, it was hard to care with how well he could see Steve, even with his eyes closed.

Billy opened them again, though, knowing Steve wanted him to watch. As he became more comfortable, the fear slowly melting away, he parted his thighs wider and leaned further into his palms. At least his body was responding. No matter how much they fucked him up, he had the same dizzying, heated response to Steve.

Steve's mouth tasted along Billy's clean skin and he reached out to slowly stroke him. He glanced up at the blonde and gave him a wide smile as he gently nipped at his abdominal muscles, turned, and sucked hard at a larger scar zigzagged across Billy's lower left ribs. "I love you, Hargrove," Steve murmured, kissed his way down his stomach, and he pushed one powerful thigh slightly further apart as he sucked so hard on Billy's inner thigh to bruise. It disappeared as quickly as Steve made it and Steve hotly kissed the spot when it was gone. He turned his head and looked up again when he took Billy in his mouth.

It had only been a little over a week, but it felt like forever, and Steve's eyes fluttered closed in pleasure as he softly moaned over Billy's length, finally tasting him again. It was as heady and intoxicating as he remembered, some strange part of Steve nurtured by the idea of consuming and owning a piece of Billy.

Steve dug his nails into Billy's thighs and it was a bit of a struggle to

look back up at him, Steve wanted badly to focus on Billy, allow him to feel some pleasure after everything he had been through. When he was able to look up, his eyes locked with Billy's, and there was a small spark at the base of Steve's spine when Billy Hargrove looked at him like that.

Billy twitched back, but only a bit, when Steve's lips ran over the scar on his ribs. He swallowed and watched him suck the skin, watched him praise it just like every other piece of him. Part of him wanted Steve to stay away from the scars, to pretend they weren't there, but the part of him that shattered when Steve touched them? Loved them just as much as any other part of him? That part burst with relief.

It hadn't been that long since they had been together, since they had touched each other, but it still felt like it was eons ago. As soon as Steve's mouth was on him, a muffled noise broke out of his throat. He dug his fingers against the tub and tried to continue watching Steve. It was difficult as he began to moan around him, to suck. Billy pressed his lips together because they were in someone else's home. Shit--he hadn't even considered that, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

At least, not with Steve looking up at him like that.

Finally, Billy pulled a hand away from the rim of the tub and slid his fingers through Steve's hair again. He wrapped a few strands around his fingers and gently pulled. He wasn't necessarily trying to do anything to Steve or to move him. He simply knew that Steve liked having his hair played with.

Steve's eyes fell to half mast in pleasure as Billy started to touch his hair and gently tugged, those sparks still flickered intense inside of him. He moaned thickly around Billy's length, honestly grateful for it since he was aware that he needed to stay quiet. It was damn near impossible not to lose himself in Billy's heat. Billy broke under pleasure, but Steve enjoyed being swept away in the sensations, enjoyed giving in to the moment and to Billy.

His hand left Billy's thigh to wrap around his own cock. Steve was already hard. He really loved making Billy happy, making Billy feel just how much Steve cared about him and the blonde's pleasure.

Steve snaked his other arm around Billy's thigh, held him firm with his hand resting upon his stomach as he took Billy deeper into his mouth. He tried to stroke himself to the tempo to that he sucked, but he found it too difficult to concentrate on both of the same time, on teasing both Billy and himself.

Steve trembled slightly as he began to suck hard in earnest. His cock throbbed as he looked up at the blonde when he could, his own thighs burning from the position on the floor. The now cold water sprayed across his back, and he felt Billy pulsing in his mouth. His hips arched into his hand, chasing his own pleasure as he gave Billy his.

Billy wasn't sure if it was from being hurt for a week or if it was because he hadn't touched himself at all. He was beginning to think it was a combination of the two leading to the sudden explosion of pleasure that had coiled in his gut and shot out. His fingers tightened in Steve's hair and he tried not to make it painful, but as soon as he started to actually come, he lost his mind. He leaned over Steve, his teeth clamping onto his lower lip as his body shook with each wave of his orgasm.

Embarrassment at unraveling so soon would have been a thing if Billy could think, but even as the pleasure ebbed and he stayed still, he couldn't pull his thoughts together. His mind was floating and his body was thrumming in the wake of the orgasm Steve had given him. Perhaps he just didn't want to come down yet, or maybe he just didn't have the energy to care. The only thing that Billy knew was that his fingers were still curled tightly in Steve's hair and his breathing was ragged.

Steve was a little surprised at the suddenness of Billy's orgasm, but when he pulled on Steve's hair harder than usual, he couldn't stop himself from loudly grunting before he whimpered in pain and rapidly swallowed around Billy's cock. His eyes watered a little and Steve was a little surprised by his own pleasure at the slight pain.

He stroked himself rapidly then, his own hips bucking when he came hard himself, shot across the tub floor and wall as he jerked hard in pleasure, his mouth still on Billy as he breathed harshly through his nose. His thighs shook from the orgasm and his legs being spread a

little too far apart for too long.

Steve swallowed thickly around Billy, still in his mouth, and he didn't move away. He'd let Billy tell him when he was done. His face was flushed and he slid his arm out from under Billy's thigh and looked up at him, his eyes glazed over even as his own trembling slowed down.

Billy finally sat up enough to look down at Steve again. He watched him through glazed eyes, his lips parted just enough to take in small breaths. When he realized he had pulled a little too hard on Steve's hair, he stroked his fingers over his scalp and then gently pulled him away from his own body. When Steve was far enough, Billy slid forward until he dropped back into the tub.

They were close enough to share the same air, now. That didn't last long, though. Billy leaned forward and caught Steve's lips with his own. He kissed him gently, several times, not deepening the kiss but not moving away. He just wanted to feel Steve, to touch and have him close again.

It was then, though, that he realized the water had turned cold and it was still hitting Steve's back. He leaned forward, reaching passed Steve to knock the lever down so that the water cut off. He shivered and tucked himself as close as he could to Steve without actually crawling into his lap.

Steve pressed their foreheads together, his eyes dropped closed as he gave a soft hum of bliss. His hand rests on Billy's chest before his fingertips gently dragged down Billy's body. Steve's voice was a little husky as he licked his lips, "Do you feel better?" Steve recalled Billy asking him basically the same thing following his last nightmare Billy witnessed, and he wondered if that was what they often did for one another--just tend to each other in the moment until somebody was blissed out.

He kissed along Billy's face tenderly. They would have to get out soon enough, but he didn't want Billy to leave the room without feeling at least marginally better. His fingers kept dancing lightly on Billy's skin, gently caressing him. It was strange that Steve felt so safe there, but that's how he felt with Billy--safe, protected, and cared for,

even when it was him caring for Billy. Billy was always so strong, strong for Steve, but it was felt nice to build Billy up in return.

Billy's muscles shivered under Steve's fingers. His skin crawled and for a moment, he almost squirmed. However, Steve's question stopped him and he looked up at him. His heart thumped almost painfully against his chest and he gnawed on the inside of his cheek.

"Yeah, Steve," Billy couldn't help the small smile as Steve's lips moved over his face. He eventually reached up to push him away, although it wasn't rough and the smile was still on his lips. "We should get out, though."

At this point, all Billy could think about was sleep. Not pain and exhaustion-induced sleep. Just *sleep*. He shifted and then slowly stood. When he was at his full height, he offered a hand to Steve.

Steve took it, though when he rose his foot slid out from under him a second and he caught himself against the wall and Billy as he barked out a laugh. Billy was finally smiling at him (even just a little), and he was clean, so the day had already markedly improved. Steve sincerely hoped though that somebody told Hopper what happened and why his home away from home suddenly had two teenagers.

Steve carefully stepped out and grabbed a nearby towel and tossed Billy the other as he quickly dried off. He knew he should feel exhausted after their whole ordeal and just coming, but Steve felt good, like *really* good. Steve felt a surprising amount of energy surge through his body, unfurling slowly within him. He was sure once he was finally down, he would pass out. But right now, Steve couldn't help but reach up and press himself a little eagerly against Billy again, kissed him quickly but deeply, teased him a little, before he suddenly pulled away and reached into the bag for some spare clothes for them.

He didn't just dress' he hopped into a pair of underwear and jeans simultaneously and pulled both up swiftly at the same time. Steve just attributed it to finally being back with Billy, grinning a little, and he even threw a wink the blonde's way when he zipped up.

Billy's eyes popped wide as Steve crowded him and kissed him

without any sort of preamble. His skin flushed and he stood there for a moment, surprised. He had been in the middle of drying himself off and it had caught him off guard. Even the wink made him blink and he hated how his body automatically reacted, his skin flushing in response.

To distract himself, Billy leaned down and picked up a pair of sweats. He pulled them up and over his hips. Normally, Billy would have gone shirtless, but the new scars decorating his body made him irritatingly self-conscious. He pulled out one of his shirts Steve brought with them and pulled it over his head. He tugged the hem down over the top of his sweats and glanced up at Steve again.

"I need sleep," Billy told him, but it also sounded like a question. He wanted Steve to lie down with him, but he wasn't sure how to ask. He was still trying to just *talk* around him again, for fuck's sake.

Steve immediately pressed himself back against Billy, smiling widely as he slid his arms over his shoulders. Steve's cheeks were slightly flushed as he he leaned up into Billy. "Food first, then sleep, babe." Steve drawled the last word a little and it was strangely reminiscent of when Steve started to get drunk, though he was touching Billy a great deal now, like he couldn't keep his hands to himself.

He gently fisted the waistband of Billy's sweats, pulled him slightly forward, with his index finger brushing against Billy's stomach as he kissed Billy again, deep, unrelenting, searing. The surprise of it all was a little overwhelming, but Steve quickly jerked his head away as soon as he started when the lights above the mirror flickered for a moment. Steve's paranoia went into alert before the light flashed steady. Steve frowned a little; it wasn't exactly the newest cabin, bad wiring and all that.

The way that Steve was kissing Billy made him feel like he was being claimed. He didn't mind at all. In fact, it made him feel more normal than anything else. He returned the kiss, even if he wasn't as aggressive as Steve was (which was strange, but maybe Billy would eventually get back to that). When the lights began to flicker, Billy tensed and opened his eyes to look up. His hands had found their way to Steve's hips, although his grip was light--as if he was letting Steve know he could back out of this if he wanted to.

When Billy's eyes flickered back to Steve, he noted his frown and paused. "Are you okay?" He brushed his fingers up and over Steve's side, attempting to coax him back to paying attention to him instead of the house.

Steve's snapped his gaze back to Billy and grinned at him again. "Yeah! I feel fucking great." What was strange was that it was true--very true. Steve always felt light after an orgasm, but it was different now, like his blood was singing and he could fucking run a marathon if he wanted to. He was dimly aware that it was a little unusual, but Steve often had a lot of energy, so his happiness explained the situation for him.

"If we were alone, I could show you just how much I really missed you." It was strange, because Steve was clearly being sincere, but the flirtatious gestures were more like Billy himself, a lot bolder than Steve normally spoke to him. Steve wore his heart on his sleeve, so it was easy to read his heated emotions. He didn't need to really voice things like that. But Steve pressed to him greedily for a moment before he pulled back and opened the door. He tugged Billy out, Steve himself still shirtless.

Billy raised his eyebrows as Steve responded and then couldn't help the noise of surprise as Steve all but pushed up against him, almost pinning him to the wall. His body warmed in response and he had to fight down the urge to respond, to grab Steve and ask him to do just that--to *show him*. Whatever Steve was doing or feeling, whatever was hyping him up, clearly had an affect on Billy.

It wasn't until they were out of the bathroom and in the living room that Billy got his own bearings again. He hesitated before closing his eyes, just for a moment, and then froze. When he opened them again, he watched Steve. His energy was like fucking *lightening*. It was rolling in waves and stretching out. Hell, it wasn't even *in* Steve, but also around him, grabbing and seeking. It made Billy hesitate again, because, compared to all of the other energy signatures he was getting used to, this was abnormal.

Notes for the Chapter:

Always the shower, why are we always in the

shower?

25. Chapter 25

Summary for the Chapter:

A massive dose of fluff coming in! Scattered showers of smut to follow.

Something was going on with Steve, and it worried Billy, but he kept quiet. Steve seemed happy and he didn't want to disrupt that. Instead, he walked over to where El was seated in front of the couch, on the floor, and eased down next to her.

Billy didn't speak, but he bumped his arm against Jane's shoulder gently as a small 'hello'.

She looked over at him and smiled a little. She was quiet, but clearly a sweet child. Steve was fidgeting around in the fridge and then the freezer. He remembered how much El loved waffles and grabbed a box. El looked Billy over carefully as Steve puttered around in the kitchen, gently took his hand, and looked at his wrist. El traced it with her fingertips for a moment, "Papa..."

It was unclear how long she had been in there; much longer than Billy, anyway. She wasn't just some teenager who was kidnapped for a week. Hopper had taken her in. He wouldn't just do that if there were other choices. She leaned against Billy as Steve started toasting waffles and setting things out on the small kitchen table. He glanced over at them, caught Billy's eye, but made no move to go over.

"You're my brother now," was El's soft statement. "What can you do?"

Billy clenched his jaw as El took his hand and traced the number. He knew it was okay. She wasn't going to hurt him, but it still set his nerves on fire. He pushed down the urge to pull away and decided, instead, that he would try to talk to her. He wanted to, but he was also weary. El should understand, though, right? She would get him feeling like a monster?

"I can... I can heal," Billy offered quietly. "But I can also hurt. I can

just... get into people's bodies. I don't know how. But I can find bones, muscles, organs. I can snap them or destroy them. I-I can see... Energy, I guess? When I close my eyes, people... they light up." Billy's cheeks burned as he talked. It was soft, mumbled, so he wasn't sure if Steve could hear or not. He wouldn't mind if he heard him, but he also wouldn't mind if he didn't.

"You... I guess you were there, too? Who is your dad?" He didn't know, of course. He remembered her saying papa before, but that dream was hazy and he couldn't remember some of what he said.

"He is tall and has white hair, he would tell me what to do. Put me in a room and there were all these machines around me, and he would tell me what he wanted me to try to do." She was clearly referring to Dr. Brenner, which was a chilling thought. They looked nothing alike, so it was hard to imagine him as her actual father. More like it was what she always called him.

"Hopper said he can be my 'dad' now. If I want," She quickly added, recalled the similar way that Hopper also nervously, and quickly, tacked it on. El turned to face him a little on the couch. "I can move things when I think about, sometimes big things. And I can hurt people, too. I have hurt people." Her voice was a little quiet then, as if she was thinking about it.

She jerked a little, suddenly, "And I can walk and see things inside people, but without moving. That's where I found you before." El smiled softly as she peered up at him. "You're very warm. It was easy to find you when Steve thought about you."

Billy stayed quiet as he listened. He thought about Dr. Brenner and the way he would touch Billy--like a fucking *child* --and talk to him gently. It did make him think about how Brenner would coax him out of his fetal positions in his cell whenever no one could get near him. Billy had felt small, then, even if he was just a couple inches shorter and slightly broader. He could see Brenner trying to be the 'dad' type, which made him want to throw up. Billy was a little too old for that garbage.

"I... I understand. I killed someone," Billy felt a wash of anxiety sweep over him. Despite having just been in the shower with Steve,

with his hands and mouth all over him, he remembered the look Steve had given him. That terror. He glanced over at Eleven, "What... what do you mean, warm?" That didn't make sense to him. Then again, what did anymore?

El softly squeezed his hand, still smiling, even though at Billy's confession, it looked a little sadder. "I've done that too, I was angry, I've hurt people. But Mike says I'm not a monster, and I try to listen to him. You can listen too, right?" She inquired softly, looked at him with large eyes that weren't all that dissimilar to Steve's.

As if she could read Billy's thoughts, she let go of his hand for a moment and glanced over in the direction of the kitchen conspiratorially. "I went inside Steve, to make sure I could feel you. He sat on the couch and I was across from him. Sometimes it's easier that way, to see things that happened, to find people, when I'm with somebody who knows what happened, knows what they feel like. It was warm and really pretty like..." She struggled for a moment, tried to think of something Mike had told her. What they sometimes did Christmas and New Years. Mike had excitedly told her all about the holidays in excruciating detail, explained to her the joy and the love and how important they were all across the world.

El smiled wider, "Fireworks, but on the *inside*."

The mention of being a monster--rather, *not* being a monster--made Billy's eyes flicker up. He hadn't even realized he was staring at the ground. He watched her quietly and then followed her gaze to Steve. He watched him and smiled a little. The warmth that filled him whenever he thought of Steve and ignored the fear made him feel better, even if it was infrequent and short.

"Fireworks, huh?" Billy mused as he looked back to Eleven. "Hopefully I don't burn alive, yeah?" He hesitated and then glanced at Steve, but only for a moment. "His energy is really bright," he admitted quietly. "It's... uhm, like..." Shit, how was he supposed to describe Steve's energy? "Like you said, I guess. A sparkler? It just keeps going, but it reaches out..." He shrugged and looked down at his lap. "I guess it's more like the sun, but with the color of the moon?"

“Can you see everybody?” She whispered back, suddenly curious as she tucked her legs under her. “What do I look like? What does Mike look like?” El leaned into the couch as she looked up at him admiringly. It was hard to have anybody look at Billy like that, hard enough when it was Steve, but El was practically a stranger. Who was also apparently now his “sister.”

Steve called for both of them to come eat, and he sat quickly, felt famished. It had been a long time since he ate at this point and he felt ravenous really. Steve wasn't sure where all this energy came from, but it needed to be satiated, one way or another. Nothing less was acceptable. There were a few times he recalled feeling this way, but not with the same fervor as the moment. He felt impatient and glanced over to the pair on the couch, who both still ignored him.

Steve nearly groaned in frustration, a little wave running through him and he could have sworn he saw something light up on his ring finger. He swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment, he was running on no sleep for so long, it just made sense. Steve would eat. He would go to sleep with Billy. It would go away and be okay.

Billy smiled a bit more at Eleven's questions. He glanced down at her, away from Steve, and almost blanched at the way she was looking at him. He opened his mouth and then chewed on the inside of his cheek. Should he tell her? He felt weird enough as it was, but... again, this was Eleven. She had the tattoo, too. Hell, she had probably gone through a lot worse than him and for a lot longer. This may help her as much as it helps him.

“You're...” Billy hadn't concentrated on it earlier. He only paid attention to Steve, so he let his eyes drift shut and watched as a wash of various lavenders and purples swirled. His lips twitched and he opened his eyes again. “Purple. Not just one purple, though. Various purples.” It reminded him of those flower fields he saw on the way to Hawkins. Of course Eleven would remind him of flowers.

“I was too... too out of it to really look earlier,” Billy admitted. “All I really remember is Max. She's like an evergreen.”

The only indication that Steve was ready for them was the smell of waffles. He hadn't actually heard him. He turned back to Eleven.

“Ready for food?”

She smiled widely then, looking much more like the little girl she actually was. “Waffles are the best food.” She rose up from the couch and headed to the table, sat, and unceremoniously pulled three onto her plate before she painstakingly coated each one with butter and drenched them with maple syrup.

Steve had some on his plate but was lost in thought and actually hadn’t taken a bite yet. He was just staring at his hands again, just like he did in the car when they first left the Upside Down. It was a little unnerving, both for Steve and anybody watching him. He moved his fingers slightly, slowly, but Steve almost felt that he had no control over them--like an involuntary twitch.

When he felt Billy’s gaze, he jerked his head up, smiled widely at him and quickly pulled his hands into his lap. Just a little too quick to be a casual gesture. Steve knew he had been caught staring, but he had no rational explanation for it himself. “C’mon, I’m starving.”

Billy was intuitive, it seemed, or he was just good at putting things together. Considering Steve’s exploding energy and the way he kept looking at his hands? Something was up and he wasn’t talking, but Steve hadn’t pushed Billy, and he would give Steve the same space. That was, of course, unless it started to hurt Steve. Then he would have to figure out how to talk to him about it.

Slowly, Billy pushed himself up from the couch and walked over to the table. He sat down and felt his stomach snarl at him. Right. Food. How long had it been since he had real fucking food? Not that paste shit they pushed at him? He put a waffle onto his plate and didn’t bother with butter or syrup. It was nice just to have the waffle. He’d enjoy that, and if he wanted anything else, he would.

After taking a bite, Billy watched El and then smiled. It seemed like the child could pull those out of him, and it was probably because of the shared trauma. “Is this your favorite?” He asked her. He already knew the answer. He could see the way she enjoyed them, but it was nice listening to her talk.

Steve began to vigorously eat as El smiled at Billy, “Mike gave these

to me and they're my favorite. Everybody knows they're my favorite. But Hopper makes me eat vegetables, I don't like those as much."

Steve watched Billy speak to El, it was strange. Max and Billy had a strange relationship, built on love, hate, and dependency. It wasn't that he couldn't be tender with Max, Steve had seen that. It was just that he didn't really treat her like a little girl, like how Billy was sort of doing now with El, and Steve was sure it had to do with that place and what they had both seen. It aged them. But it was nice to treat El like the child she truly was, and provide her the childhood she missed.

Steve slowed his eating for a moment and didn't interrupt them, but he reached under the table and took Billy's hand. He slowly stroked his thumb over the back of Billy's hand, not wanting to be disconnected from him.

"I didn't like vegetables, either," Billy admitted, "Not when I was your age." He picked at the waffle and then ate another bite. He knew he had to go slow. Inhaling the food was probably a terrible idea, and he wasn't stupid. "But how do you think I got so muscular?" He raised an eyebrow and leaned back against his chair. "If you wanna be strong, you gotta eat well, yeah?"

Then, Billy felt Steve's hand on his own. He looked over to him, and he *did* notice that he hadn't flinched. That was a win, right? He turned his hand over and curled his fingers around Steve's. His other hand stayed on the plate so he could eat the remaining of his food.

"But maybe I'm wrong," Billy grinned a bit at Eleven, "You look pretty damn strong, kid. Maybe the waffles are what's doing it."

"It's for sure the waffles. You should tell Hopper." She didn't eat them delicately, she cut massive chunks and crammed them in her mouth. Steve had to stifle a laugh, squeezed Billy's hand softly. They would have so much to think and talk about, what they would do—*have* to do really to stay safe. But not now.

After Steve finally had some food, he could feel himself slowly crashing. It was actually pleasant. He spent so long terrified to sleep, apprehensive to dream, but with Billy there, he felt protected. Steve

cleaned as many of the dishes as possible. It was incredibly dark out due to the winter weather, but not really that late. Hopper still wasn't there and Steve made an executive decision to steal his bed with Billy, at least for tonight. Steve would apologize in the morning. He said goodnight to El, who would likely remain awake until Hopper was home, and trusted Billy to follow him.

It was strange that only now Steve realized he was shirtless, as he stripped down to his briefs. It was unlike him, and he couldn't account for his earlier exuberance when his eyes felt so heavy now.

Billy nodded at Eleven, although it was obvious that the waffles weren't what makes a person strong. Still, he found it to be cute coming from El. He watched as Steve cleaned up and then ruffled El's hair as he walked passed her and into the bedroom. He slid the door mostly shut because he was sure Hopper wouldn't want it *all the way* closed. At least, not with two teenagers sleeping in the same bed.

It felt strange, but Billy wasn't okay to sleep without both his shirt and sweats with Steve yet. Sure, they had messed around in the shower, but this was more... intimate to him. He wanted to keep the clothes on for his own sense of security, which he knew was shitty, but it was hard to reason with his heart. His brain was being logical enough. The rest of him wasn't.

Without a word, Billy climbed onto the bed. He looked over at Steve and then held an arm out. One step at a time, right?

Steve was practically half asleep in the few minutes it took Billy to come to bed and he lazily opened his eyes when he felt the bed dip. He gave a soft smile and immediately scooted closer to Billy, pressed his body flush against the others', but clearly too exhausted for anything similar to the shower. Steve wrapped an arm around Billy's waist and brought him close. He yawned once, all of his earlier energy gone as he held Billy to his chest and was fast asleep moments later.

—*—

In his dreams, Steve was often in the tunnels, surrounded by the dogs. Often Dustin was there. Sometimes Steve had already failed to

protect him and the other kids, but other times, Steve was *about* to fail. He knew when it was happening, but being unable to stop it from happening, he was forced to watch the kids die, one by one.

This time he was alone, but not by himself. They circled him, hungry, and when they knocked down his body, he was helpless and unsure of how far they dragged him in the tunnels. Steve screamed at the top of his lungs, flailed around uselessly, but he didn't have a weapon to protect him. The first one tore easily through through his stomach, like tissue paper. There was blood in his mouth and he was begged for his life, tears streamed down his face. Steve begged helplessly for somebody to save him, God, Billy, Nancy, El—he didn't want to die like this—! There was an answer to his prayers as another moved in. Its mouth opening and all Steve saw was its petal teeth and the endless red before it clamped down on his head with that *crunch* .

Steve fell down hard from the bed, didn't feel Billy trying to hold him down for a moment, get a grip on Steve as he howled out. Steve thrashed violently away from him, all the while screaming for *Billy* as tears ran hotly down his cheeks. Steve wasn't often loud, not like this, not since the first time Billy witnessed it. Maybe Steve let out a shout or two before he woke himself up from the force of it. But now he *screamed* hysterically. When Steve hit the floor, and there wasn't a weapon under the bed, Steve wailed out. He was soaked in sweat and he scrambled away and into the wall, held his legs tightly to his body, as if they would offer him some protection. Steve hit his back and his head violently against the wall, still trying to get away, forcing his body to try to *move* .

Grappling with Steve while he woke up from his nightmare was not something Billy was ready for. Steve's screams and thrashing had woken him up, and he had tried his best to get him to wake up, to respond, but all that did was throw him into more of a fit. As soon as they were on the floor, Billy tangled in Steve's limbs, he tried *again* to calm him down, to bring him back to the present, the cabin, and when it didn't work, tears burned in his eyes. He felt fucking useless as Steve frantically searched for a weapon before cornering himself against the wall.

Billy didn't even have *words* . He wasn't sure what to say to calm Steve down, to break him from whatever nightmare he was living in.

It was worse now, though, because Billy had issues talking in general. How was he supposed to comfort Steve at this point? Panic raced through his veins, but he eased forward, anyway, managing to get somewhat close to Steve without him panicking more.

“Steve...” Billy flinched and reached out to gently touch Steve’s forearm. He brushed his fingers down to his wrist. “Baby, it’s me. It’s Billy. I’m right here.”

When the bedroom door swung open, Billy tensed. He knew by the looming presence that Hopper was there, and he didn’t doubt that El had followed him. He raised his hand, though, not looking back at them as he scooted closer to Steve.

Steve hit the wall several times as Billy got closer, not dissimilar to a frightened animal, and the whole situation was just like the first time Billy discovered Steve had horrific nightmares. But they weren’t together then, didn’t love each other, and it was hard not to feel like they hadn’t made any progress at all.

Steve moaned out, low and desperate, as the lights began to rapidly flicker and loudly hum--like there was too much energy and electricity inside of them to be contained. There was the telltale click of a gun, Hopper. They all knew by now what it meant, a demogorgon found them, was coming to kill them all, and even with both El and Billy, the prospect was no less terrifying, especially to Steve. He screwed his eyes tightly closed and pulled hard at his hair when the bulbs burst. The lights shattered inside the entire cabin and caused them all to jump in anticipation.

Steve let out a broken sob, still half torn between this world and his dream, when the fine hairs on his arms stood up on end for both him and Billy. “Don’t--don’t touch me, don’t touch me, don’t touch me--!” His entire body pulsed and thrummed loudly inside him, like a generator, and his chest felt constricted as he struggled to breathe.

Billy flinched as the lights shattered and then breathed in slowly. He was trying to calm himself in all the panic, even if the sound of Hopper’s gun cocking made his stomach twist. His eyelids fell shut and he paused. Steve was fucking *shining*. He was bright, like a star that was ready to burst or burn out, and when he opened his eyes, he

finally realized that somewhere between that dream and Steve coming to get him, something had happened to Steve.

“It’s fine, Steve. You’re okay. Nothing is coming,” Billy reached out again and curled his fingers around Steve’s arm. He knew that the lights flickering and the bulbs shattering were a direct result of Steve’s energy. It was reaching, clawing, and Billy wasn’t sure *why* , but he needed to get Steve to calm down, to snap out of his panic.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” Steve screamed at him, still not seeing Billy, and he shoved the blonde. This wasn’t something that Billy hadn’t experienced before. Steve often fought him in a violent nightmare and each one varied in the severity that Steve fought. Typically, a gentle touch or two was enough to calm him, reach him, but this time was different. Steve wasn’t *there* with Billy, not even close, and Steve defended himself against he thought was a demodog, dragging him by his arm.

Under normal circumstances, Billy would have fallen back on his ass. Steve was practically curled up in a ball against the wall and barely had any physical leverage to do any damage. But this wasn’t normal and the last thing Billy saw was Steve screaming at him, tears running down his face, and pure, bright white lightning crackling around Steve’s arms and palms before the bolts shot out of his fingertips.

It sent Billy flying across the room, cracked his back and head against the bedroom wall, and instantly broke two ribs. Steve jerked then, his eyes wide in terror as he snapped free from his night terror, while his hands still crackled, the electricity still flowing strongly through his arms and body, sparking around his fingertips.

As soon as Billy hit the wall, he was out. The surge of electricity had shot through him, lit him up, and forced his entire body to convulse. It’s what sent Billy back into the wall. He didn’t feel anything after that, but the warmth of his own power ignited and began to roam over his body. It caught the burnt nerves, the broken ribs, the lack of heartbeat, and did its job in healing whatever damage the electricity caused.

But Billy still stayed slumped against the wall. His hand, which had

been scalded, began to change in color as it healed.

The silence was deafening in the room and Steve was sure he stopped breathing as he looked at Billy and brought up his hands. This had to be a dream. It all had to be one big fucked up dream. Steve was up like a shot and quickly crawled over the bed, to the opposite side of the room where Billy lay.

“Babe—” Steve started breathlessly and he gingerly touched Billy’s leg, a tiny spark danced on Billy’s skin and Steve jerked his hand back and covered his mouth in horror. Hopper held tightly onto El, who watched the scene unfold with more curiosity than anything else, her eyes wide.

Steve let out a half sob, pushed his hand harder over his mouth to muffle the sound. He hadn’t done that. This was all just another dream, just like down in the tunnels. None of this was real. He was just tired. Steve just needed to sleep more. Steve violently shook his head, it was impossible, he didn’t just kill Billy Hargrove.

Thought slowly started to happen in Billy’s head again. It was gibberish at first, but as he started to wake up, groggy and out of it, his body still trembling after healing, panic seized him. The feeling had been so similar to him waking up in the lab that, for a moment, he thought he was back there. His eyes snapped open and he fought to keep himself limp or pliant for whoever was there.

When Billy took in his surroundings, though, he almost sobbed in relief. Fuck. Fuck. Then, of course, he saw Steve and he still couldn’t bring himself to move.

“What the *fuck* , Steve,” Billy’s voice was ragged and his hands shook as he tried to call himself down. That explained the scorch marks in the lab. The reason behind Steve’s weird behavior. And damn, his energy.

“That really fucking hurt. Jesus, that packed some heat,” Billy sat up slowly, as if expecting his own powers to have stopped working.

Steve’s eyes were wide and wild as he took Billy, watched him stir as Steve gaped in shock and horror. Blood dripped down his nose and

even though he could taste it in his mouth, Steve paid it no mind. Steve hadn't done that, that was impossible. His breath kept hitching as he struggled for air. It felt like there was a ton of bricks on his chest, crushing him slowly as more bricks tumbled at the top of the pile, and he couldn't stop himself from clutching his chest.

"This-this isn't happening *again* --this is a dream, I'm in a dream, I'm not here, this--not real, no, no--" Steve kept shaking his head, looking at Billy with the same horrified expression he bestowed upon Billy when he saw Billy kill that man. But the look--now, it clearly had nothing to do with Billy. Steve was terrified of himself, his hands shook, but when they crackled a little, he flung himself back away from Billy, and his back hit the bed frame as he pressed himself there and stared at his hands. Stared at what they could do and how they hurt his closest person. No. How *he* had hurt his closest person.

Billy flinched as Steve jerked away and he hated himself for it. That pain had been familiar and now his brain was connecting what Steve had done to the lab. Billy couldn't have that. Wouldn't have that. Steve was the only person he felt remotely okay around now, and he didn't want that to stop. That meant getting his ass up and going to him, though, and the fear almost kept his ass put.

Despite the twist in his stomach, Billy eased himself forward. He didn't get all the way up, though. Instead, he scooted forward until he was in Steve's space. Shit, weren't they just a great fucking, broken pair of teenagers?

"Hey, Steve. It's okay. Whatever this is, we'll figure it out. I mean, fuck... we have a lot to figure out. Come on, you gotta breathe. I'm okay. Look. I healed just fine," Billy stretched his hand out to show Steve. He could see Steve start to spiral, start to have that self-deprecating line of thought.

Billy's next move wasn't really thought out, but he didn't care. He grabbed Steve's hand and sucked in a small breath as electricity danced over his skin. He moved closer, then, crowding Steve's space.

"See? I'm fine."

The shock wasn't nearly as severe, really it felt more like a prolonged

exposure to some sort of static electricity now, but Steve whimpered just the same, his eyes quickly watered and he ducked down his head in fear and shame. It crackled and fizzed out on Billy's hand and Steve covered his eyes, shook his head, and bit down hard on his lip to muffle any noise he wanted to make.

Steve wanted to scream, but what came out as a harsh croaking, "I'm hurting you, I'm hurting you..." That was the difference between them. Billy was terrified of what Steve thought of him, that Steve saw Billy as a monster. But Steve actually *hurt* Billy, not another person. "Please, please don't....I'm going to fucking hurt you, I'm...is this a dream?" Steve begged as his eyes searched Billy's, trusted Billy that even if this was a dream to be honest with him.

The electricity was gone and there was a soft click and a flashlight shone near the pair, Hopper's gruff voice sounded even more exhausted than usual, "Get him up when you can, we need to talk." Steve hated when Billy knew about his nightmares and panic attacks, it made him feel shitty and ashamed, and it wasn't a leap to think just how much it was going to kill him to have more people know about that vulnerable side to him. Steve couldn't stop shaking, even he squeezed Billy's hand.

Billy kept a firm hold on Steve's hand. He ran his thumb over the skin gently--a probably futile attempt to calm Steve down. The sudden light from Hopper's flashlight made him squint, but he nodded in understanding. When he tore his gaze away from the cop and looked at Steve, he smiled a little.

"You're not hurting me," Billy squeezed Steve's hand. "And this is real." Now Billy had to consider another element when trying to bring Steve out of his nightmares. He had to find it in himself to just get the fuck over the lab. Before then, he had been resilient and he could *cope* with shit. It felt like the lab had taken all of that away, had destroyed whatever confidence or barriers Billy had built to survive with Neil.

And now Billy desperately needed to be normal for Steve. He needed to pretend because, in the end, more people depended and wanted Steve around. And fuck, Billy loved him.

“Come on, pretty boy. We need to figure this out, yeah?” Billy pushed himself up from the floor, but as he did so, he took Steve's arms and pulled him up, as well. He let go of Steve once he was sure he was stable.

Steve felt numb as he rose with Billy. He saw Hopper steer El away out of the corner of his eye, and Steve seemed to realize for the first time that he was just in his underwear. His head was down and Steve felt Billy's intense gaze on him. Steve couldn't look him in the eye though, he would break if he did, he knew it. Everything came down, not slowly, but it crashed upon him all at once.

“I didn't mean to, I didn't...” Steve whispered, and he truly felt like a piece of shit. He was supposed to be the one person who would never hurt Billy, but he damn near killed him. Steve withdrew just one of his hands to cover his face so that Billy wouldn't see him, even if he knew what Steve was doing as he grimaced and bent over a little as fresh tears fell down his cheeks. Steve wasn't in the throes of a panic attack anymore, but he still silently sobbed, his breath hitched and his back shook. Shit, what if he did it again? How could he be around Billy like this? How could he be around Dustin, around anybody?

Billy hesitated as Steve pulled his hand away. He knew what it felt like to be different, obviously, and Steve was trying to cope. He understood, but it didn't hurt any less to know that Steve was terrified of touching him. A chill washed over him and he stepped away. He wasn't leaving, though. Instead, he was grabbing Steve's jeans off of the floor.

“Come on. I know you didn't mean to. Steve... I understand,” Billy mumbled the last part and offered Steve his jeans. “You can... trust me on this one. I get it. I understand. But crying about it isn't going to help, Steve. You have to learn how to control it. That's your only option and... and I'm here to help, so...” At least Billy was talking now, even if it was brought on by Steve's weird ability. Pot meet kettle.

Steve swallowed as he wordlessly took his pants and stepped inside them, stumbled slightly as he did so. Despite Billy's words, he blamed himself for his. If this was real, and Billy had no reason to lie, and it certainly felt real as fuck, if he wasn't as fucked up as he was, he

would have never hurt Billy. Steve always hated the nightmares, but it was different when he was just hurting himself. When he brought Billy into this shit, and the blonde refused to budge, Steve begrudgingly accepted it over time. Billy was the only thing that helped it stop anyway. But the prospect of physically hurting Billy? That destroyed him, it was like...

Steve grabbed Billy's wrist suddenly, his head still down and his jeans unbuttoned. He whispered, "I can't hurt you, you can't just...let me hurt you. If you need to hit me--I can't do what Neil did. I would rather--"

"Don't." Billy was quick to respond and his voice was harsh. "Don't. Neil signed my life over to those fucks. He told me--he told me they could fix me. Just don't, Steve." By the time he ended his sentence, his voice was weak and almost *fearful*. He pulled his hand away so that Steve wasn't holding his wrist. He took an unsteady step backward and could feel himself curling in, withdrawing.

"Asking me to hit you is--" Billy's gaze dropped to the floor and he felt what little food he had eaten crawl up his throat. He swallowed. "It's--just. Go to the kitchen. Hopper is probably waiting for you." Billy wanted to scream, to punch something, to *cry*. He wasn't sure what to say to Steve. Just offering to let him hit Steve after what he had gone through? It left a sour taste in his mouth, and despite the fact that his body could heal at a rapid pace, he *ached*.

"Just... please go. I'll be there in a minute."

Steve stood there for several moments and at one point he did move forward to leave the room before he simply stopped. Hopper and El had seen him, really seen him, and even though he was sure they dealt with their own demons and wouldn't judge Steve, he couldn't face them.

He turned back to Billy and Steve knew he fucked up again, but his voice was a little weak. "I can't, they...nobody knew but you and I...I *can't*. None of it makes sense and....it makes even less sense without you." So instead of leaving the room, Steve moved to the bed and sat down on it, his hands in his lap. "I thought I dreamed it, down there in the tunnels. I wasn't sleeping when you were gone and it just...I

thought I was gonna die. Maybe I am dead, or just crazy. That kinda makes sense, right? This is all a figment of my imagination and....I'm not asking you to hit me, I'm saying...don't just let me hurt you..."

In what world would Billy Hargrove want him? Shit the more the thought about it, the more reasonable it became and Steve frowned, lost in thought. Maybe he just finally snapped after Billy beat the shit out of him and the Upside-Down. Honestly, it was less frightening that the truth, Steve knew he was a freak from the nightmares and the panic attacks, but for this to just happen to him? Absent the lab? It was insane.

"It's all real, Steve. We're both fucked up and we both need to... to figure out how to work this. How to survive. Running from it isn't going to help, and neither is thinking it's a damned dream. Something happened to you down there. I don't know what, but..." Billy didn't move close to Steve. He didn't trust himself. He wanted to touch him badly enough as it was. But he needed to think and actually talk, and being near Steve prevented that.

"You didn't fucking electrocute me on purpose. And I heal like crazy now, so I'm not really that concerned about it. But if you are, if you fucking *care* about this... whatever we have continuing, you gotta... you gotta try. And you need to learn how to control it." Billy clenched his hands. "I'm just as fucked up as you, Steve. I m--murdered that guy. Without *touching* him. I can't... I have to--" He trailed off and tucked his arms around his own sides. "You're all I have left and you can't t-tell me that this'll change *anything* because I couldn't--I can't do this alone."

"He tortured you. I love you. There's a difference," came Steve's soft reply as he looked down at his lap. "There's a really big fucking difference. And it doesn't matter that you can heal, you still feel pain and.." Steve clenched his jaw and forced himself not to start crying all over again, it wasn't going to help anything. He balled his hands into fists, tried to focus on the stitches in the blanket, yellowed with age.

"We both know I suck at control. And I suck even more at the nightmare shit. How am I going to stop myself from something like tonight? I only fucking sleep with you, and I fucking threw you

across the room-!" Steve was getting upset, not near tears, but more riled up, and maybe it was a good thing. Billy and El could control their emotions very well, and what Billy had problems with was his anger. Steve thrived off his emotions, but had no control over his fear. It rose up in him like the tide, made it impossible to breathe. But anger, frustration, he could usually handle those.

Steve looked up at the ceiling and swallowed. He couldn't just give Billy up, then he really wouldn't sleep and for sure go crazy, not that he was entirely sold that he wasn't already. Steve searched along the wood beams above him for answers, there were none, but he always knew he couldn't just push away Billy himself. "I love you, I love you so fucking much it *hurts* , I just don't know how I'm not...gonna keep fucking this up." His eyes narrowed a little in thought. "It's coming back. I can...kinda feel it? Slow, but..." He sighed and then slowly laid back on the bed, his legs still folded over the bed.

"I can't just tell them. Not first. It sounds crazy and I need you to hear it first. Make sure I'm not..." Steve paused, and tilted his head to look at Billy. He didn't want to say crazy again, have Billy scold him, but he wasn't asking for the blonde to act as a sounding board. "Please, it's always you first, I know I fucked up but I can't...have them be first."

Billy let Steve ramble. He knew it was his way of moving through the motions, moving through his thoughts, and eventually, he would come to a stopping place and figure out his next steps. It was always like this. Ranting seemed to be Steve's way of finding solutions; it was easier than Billy's. Less violent, too.

"You can tell me anything. You know that," Billy glanced to Steve's side, seeming conflicted for just a moment. Then, he eased forward and sank down next to Steve on the bed. He reached over and slid his hand over Steve's thigh. He squeezed him gently, but kept his gaze on the floor. "And you know... how I feel about you. I don't think either of us would.. Would do well without each other. We just need to figure this shit out. So... Tell me about what happened. Why your energy is so..."

Then, Billy remembered what El told him about fireworks. Then, for some stupid, insane reason, he remembered the first night they had

gotten drunk together. “Your energy is like silver... and white fireworks. It’s really bright, but it’s different than other people’s. It reaches out.” Which was explained by the electricity.

“You remember how we got drunk as fuck and started swapping details? Like, shit about each other? We could... do that, again, if you want. You give me a detail about being down there, and I’ll give you a detail about the lab.” That way, it was less painful and they were both able to talk, to reveal something that had happened.

Steve searched inside himself and felt that the energy was too far away, too far away to come back and hurt Billy, almost like it needed to be charged. The thought made him inwardly groan but he felt assured he wasn’t about to hurt Billy. So when Steve felt the dip in the bed and the hand on his leg, he wanted to cry all over again in relief. Billy was *trying*, trying so hard that as Steve listened, he swallowed painfully hard the emotions he felt and gently turned his body to curl up around the blonde’s. Steve tucked his legs up and wrapped one arm around Billy’s waist, pressed his face into his side. He breathed him in; it was easier than looking at Billy’s face.

Steve took a deep breath, knew Billy felt him do so. “I really thought...it had to be fake, like a dream. Like it’s just been enough time so that, I can...see things? You know? But when I was down there...one of the dogs grabbed my leg and it...” God, he had to think about it to say it and he couldn’t cause another panic attack now. Even if he wouldn’t hurt Billy, it was just so much to deal with. So instead he squeezed the blonde’s middle, his own breath hitched. “It grabbed my leg and dragged me down the tunnels to—to others, in the dark, and it started...eating me.”

Billy didn’t mind that Steve wrapped himself around his body. In fact, it sort of grounded him. Even though Steve was scared, Billy liked the way his energy floated over him, slid along his skin, pulled him in. He wouldn’t tell Steve that it did that. Not yet. After being shocked into the wall, he doubted Steve needed to hear that Billy *knew* about his electricity without actually knowing what it was.

“How did you... did the electricity kill it, then?” Billy hesitated and then grunted. “Sorry, fuck. I forgot. Right. Uhm. When they took me to the lab, the first thing they did was shoot me full of... shit. I don’t

know what it was. The first one was so fucking cold. I couldn't feel my body. The second one felt like I was boiling alive. And the third...was just pain." He pressed his lips together and reached down to slide his fingers through Steve's hair. He made sure to scrape his nails along his scalp as he did.

Honestly, it was to calm them both down.

Steve upturned his head sharply and looked at Billy with an almost unreadable expression, just because it was hard to untangle. There were a lot of emotions there, despair, relief, pain, and realization. His eyes filled with tears a moment but before Billy commented, Steve pressed his face back into Billy's skin, and he felt Billy gently resume threading his fingers through his hair. Steve squeezed a little harder around his waist.

It confirmed for Steve that somehow Billy connected with him, dragged him to that place. Again, Steve knew it was unintentional and he meant what he said earlier, he would always come for Billy. So regardless of what happened, or his agony over his current state of being, he wasn't about to blame Billy. Or share his thoughts so that Billy could blame himself. It was all too much, there had to be time *later*. Steve couldn't handle sharing that right now. So instead he tenderly kissed Billy's skin as his fingers slowly moved, that was what Steve wanted to focus on.

His voice cracked a little with emotion, "I was...screaming, really...really loud, and I thought I was going to die. I thought...about you and the kids and I took the bat and I rammed it like--in its mouth? Its..." Fuck, this was hard to think about, hard not to go back there in his head. Steve squeezed a little harder around Billy and pressed his body closer, curled himself flush against the blonde. "Its insides, blood or whatever it has, fell on me--in me--and it kept biting me."

Billy continued to slide his fingers through Steve's hair. It unnerved him that one of those *things* had taken Steve down, had started to chew on him. It must have been all of those punctures he had healed. They had been deep and precise, as if blades had dug into him instead of teeth. He clenched his jaw and tried not to think about Steve swallowing or choking on those thing's blood. It made him

want to wretch, so he couldn't imagine what Steve had gone through.

"It's fine, Steve. You're with me, yeah? They're not here. You're okay." He slid his fingers from Steve's hair to his face. His thumb brushed over his lower lip and then along his jaw before he tangled them back into his hair. He had to choose the details of his stay carefully. There were blips of time that he couldn't really remember, but that was probably a good thing.

"I--the first time the healing began, they were fascinated. To test it, they started breaking small bones. Just... fingers and things like that." Billy stared at the wall and then dropped his gaze to Steve. "Eventually they tried things like my femur. The bigger the bone, the longer it took. At first."

Steve's eyes dropped for a moment, relished Billy's touch and when his hand was back in his hair, Steve took a deep breath and gently urged Billy to lay down beside him. As soon as they were both on the bed, Steve shook a little as he pressed his face into Billy's neck and felt the hand back in his hair. He couldn't look at Billy, not yet, he would break if he had to, for what he went through and whenever he imagined Billy back there, strapped down and tortured.

"It bit my-my chest and I just...I could taste it, I could *taste* it, and it was bitter and I couldn't stop screaming and-and I just grabbed it like—I grabbed as hard as I could and my fingers like—sunk *into* it—and I just couldn't—I had to get you out!" Steve shook harder, grabbed onto Billy as he stammered and pressed his fingers into the blonde's flesh as he relived the moment. His tongue felt heavy when he tried to talk, but his mind was a blur, like he could remember every second as an hour. "And then it just fucking lit up, like I could see—maybe inside it and it started—it was smoking, it smoked. And then it..it fell on top of me and it was...gone. Dead. Jesus, I killed it, I—" Steve lifted up on hand again, stared at it, as if somehow his own hand could grow and more powerful if he just kept looking.

As Steve lifted his hand, Billy looked at it with him. He let his eyelids fall half-way shut. Both of them seemed to be lost, consumed, and he wondered if they were ever going to feel some semblance of normal. Perhaps not, but maybe together they would be okay. He reached up and slid his fingers over Steve's. Except, he purposefully used the arm

that had the tattoo on his wrist. He tangled his fingers with Steve's and brushed his thumb over his skin in slow strokes. Still, he kept his arm turned so Steve could see the number.

As if saying you're not alone .

"I'm glad you did," Billy murmured. "Otherwise, instead of being here with you, I'd have to just be with you in my dreams." He hesitated and eased Steve's hand down so he could brush his lips over the smooth skin. He closed his eyes all the way now. "They found... a way to make the process *faster* . They had to fuck with me. Say shit that riled me up. Their favorite topic was you. They made me say your name. They threatened to hurt you if I didn't. The more I..." Billy trailed off this time and opened his eyes. It seemed as if he was the one who was struggling to think this time. He pressed another kiss to Steve's hand.

Steve turned his head up and watched Billy for several minutes, felt the soft kiss on his skin. It made sense, if they knew that about Billy, to use Steve against him. He just hated how he was used to cause Billy pain, to provoke him into uncontrollable hurt. Steve felt unsure for a moment before he leaned up and slowly kissed Billy's lips. His brow furrowed and he touched Billy's jaw as he softly sucked his lower lip and slowly arched his body against him so Billy felt every inch of him there, with him now.

Steve struggled to come to terms to what happened to both of them, and the last thing he wanted was to be a burden to Billy. He felt that way so often already, Billy cared for him after every nightmare, every fucking panic attack. So if he had to get some control over this shit to keep Billy safe in return, it was a small price to pay to keep him here like this.

Steve gently broke the kiss but didn't move away, a tiny smile blossomed on his lips. "I think I...I think I fucking melted a wall to get to you." And it sounded so incredulous and insane that he couldn't help quietly laughing as he searched Billy's eyes.

Billy leaned into the kiss and shivered as Steve sucked on his lower lip. It was something that he'd never get used to. Steve would most likely always set fire to his body, no matter how many times they

touched. He squeezed Steve's hand and looked up at him from his relaxed position on the bed. He glanced over Steve's face and then raised his eyebrows at the statement. The way Steve laughed made his lips curl into a small smile.

"That's pretty badass, babe," Billy murmured. "Like some knight with a white horse, but instead you're bringing some electricity shit." He chuckled and leaned up from the bed to kiss Steve again. It was light, a simple brush, but at least Billy began to feel okay doing it. Just being near Steve last night was difficult for him.

As Billy kissed Steve, he cupped his cheek with his free hand and stroked his thumb over the stubble there. He broke the kiss, but only so he could tilt his head and kiss Steve again, but this time, he slid his tongue over Steve's lower lip. It was hesitant and only lasted a second before he was pulling away again.

It didn't occur to Billy that he hadn't given Steve a piece of information. He had been drawn into his mouth and had forgotten about sharing.

But Steve didn't press him, he knew it was always harder for Billy to open up to him, and so long as Billy came around (which, he continually did), Steve would wait. "I'm okay, I'm okay..." He whispered and drew Billy back to his mouth, parted his lips slightly so Billy could feel him if he wanted to. Steve arched against him again and slid his hand slowly up Billy's side.

Steve didn't withdraw from Billy now; he knew there was no risk of hurting him and Steve didn't want to deny the blonde emotionally, either. He pressed their foreheads together, "When I saw you on that table, I thought..." Steve didn't need to finish, didn't want to risk saying it and have it come true.

"I would die to keep you safe Billy. I'll never let anybody touch you like that again if I can stop it. If getting this shit meant getting you out, then it was worth it." Came Steve's fierce whisper. And it was hard to doubt him since it was true long before Steve could manipulate electricity. There was Steve, who broke down his front door with a bat to threaten Neil, fiery and protective of Billy in a way nobody else had been in his life.

It was surprisingly easy for Billy to take the invitation to explore Steve's mouth. He did so slowly, as if savoring Steve, before slowly pulling back so he could talk. He listened to Steve quietly and then smiled. This was the Steve he knew. The Steve the kids knew. The protective, bold teen who didn't give a shit what stood in his way. He dropped his head back against the bed and carded his fingers through Steve's hair.

"There's King Steve," Billy teased. He had ignored the drop in his stomach at the mention of being strapped to the table. He remembered the red lights blinking and the pools of blood around his body and underneath the stretcher. He also remembered Steve's hands on his chest as they frantically tried to find the wound or whatever had caused all of that blood.

What the 'doctors' had done may haunt Billy, especially *that* part. Maybe he could tell Steve--just to get it off of his chest (which was a terrible way of thinking about it).

"When you came in, they were... I don't know. Testing and watching bone growth? They had split my chest open. I was healing faster than they could cut, though, so they had to use... God, they looked like tongs? They held me open while they prodded around." Billy's eyebrows furrowed and his lips twitched. That had been the weirdest fucking sensation behind being weightless in the tank. "That's why there was so much blood. I guess you fuckin' melted the wall and that's when everyone started freaking out."

All the color drained from Steve's face, along with his expression and it was replaced with something dark, something Billy had seen in the car that day when they left Neil's house. It was like a dark cloud came over Steve's face and for a second, even though that part of him wasn't built back up yet, there was a violent spark inside him, dangerous and unpredictable. Even still, it was difficult to hear Steve's retort, "I hit some people, I don't know if they're dead but if they are, I'm glad." It was curt and and there wasn't a hint of remorse. Steve had his own sense of what was right and wrong, what people deserved in life. And he didn't waste time dishing out sympathy to people who cruelly tortured children and teenagers.

Steve's body was rigid with anger and when he saw Billy staring at

him, he turned his gaze away, but made no apology. Maybe it made him the real monster, but Steve felt it so strongly that he wasn't about to take it back. How anybody could do that to another person and then go home at night--somebody like that didn't deserve an ounce of kindness. Steve's voice was rough with emotion, couldn't meet Billy's eyes. "That's not King Steve. He was a coward. But even if you push me away or end this, I'm not going to let anybody touch you like that, ever."

Billy watched Steve's emotions change and tilted his head. He was certain that Steve wouldn't hurt him, so he wasn't scared. He closed his eyes and 'watched' as Steve's silver energy spiked out and began to grow. It was beautiful, no matter how much it scared Steve. Eventually, he would be able to control it. Billy opened his eyes again and reached up to cup Steve's cheek.

"I'm not talking about a king of a high school, Steve. Kings were known to protect their people, their subjects. They did what they could, usually no matter what it cost them. You are that person. You'll protect, even if it hurts you." Billy brushed his thumb over the top of Steve's cheek and then gently guided him down so he could brush their lips together. "And stop thinking I'm going to push you away. When... when we came back here, I was terrified that *you* didn't want *me*. I was..." Billy laughed against Steve's lips, although it was a little broken, "I was convinced after what you saw that you were scared of me."

After kissing Steve again, Billy leaned back against the bed. "I think we have to... to put some fears to rest, yeah? I'm not leaving you. Not willingly. We'll work through this shit."

Steve searched his face as Billy spoke to him and laid down beside him slowly. He was surprised by Billy's reaction, genuinely surprised. Steve was usually the calmer of the two, but that was with action, not emotion. He expected Billy to be disgusted, even if he appreciated the sentiment, but to just accept Steve, accept the ferocity of the lengths he would go to protect Billy? That surprised him.

"I was never scared of you. I know you would never...even before, when you said you would never hit me before if you could help it. You could have hit me plenty of times, sometimes I even....I know I

asked you. And you still didn't." Ultimately Billy Hargrove wasn't his father.

Steve took Billy's hand and interlocked their fingers. He knew they would need to go out. He would have to explain what happened to Hopper, and just the thought of it was so exhausting he barely kept his head up. But Billy understood. Steve looked his face over, a small smile on his lips, "I'm probably going to believe in that corny shit and fate all the more now, Hargrove."

Billy visibly relaxed when Steve admitted that he wasn't scared. That he never was. It seemed like a fucking weight was lifted off of him as he sagged into the bed. He watched Steve quietly and ignored the fact that his eyes stung with tears. It was hard to finally hear it, to digest it after so long (it wasn't even that long) of believing that Steve was terrified of him. He tightened his hand with Steve's and then threw his other arm over his face, hiding his eyes from Steve like a fucking child. His chest shuddered as tears began to slip into his hairline.

"You're ridiculous," Billy muttered, although there wasn't any heat behind it. In fact, it almost sounded *affectionate* . Even through the damned tears that were soaking into his hair, he tried to make things less tense, less *emotional* .

"I love you, too," Steve said softly, moved Billy's arm to look at his face before he kissed him slowly, fisted his hands into Billy's shirt and gingerly pulled Billy on top of him. Steve smiled warmly up at him. "I'm so lucky. The hot new boy in town likes *me* . What are all the girls going to say?" He lifted his head slightly and pressed his forehead to Billy's, softly laughing. "He's from Cali-for *nia* ," Steve drawled, softly kissing Billy's face, a smile on his lips. "He's so dreamy, I could die."

Steve slid his hand up Billy's back slowly, his voice a little more serious, "He's so amazing, this Billy Hargrove...he could have anybody he wanted and he picked *me* ."

Billy sucked in a short breath when Steve pulled his arm away. He grunted as he was pulled on top of Steve and almost fucking *sputtered* as the guy started talking. His cheeks began to warm and his heart

thudded against his chest. It was absolutely ridiculous and absurd and he fucking *loved* it. He laughed, essentially messing up whatever kiss Steve attempted to make. The laughter kept going as Steve kept talking, and by the time Steve was done, his fingers were curled into the blankets and his lips were spread into a wide smile.

“What the hell did I do to deserve you,” Billy shook his head and adjusted his knees so he was more comfortable straddling Steve’s body. He looked over his eyes, his cheeks, his lips. Everything. “I dunno, pretty boy, but you’re mine now, yeah?” He leaned down, essentially doing a damned push up on the bed to press his lips over Steve’s. As soon as his eyes closed, the flare of Steve’s energy sent a thrill through his body.

Steve smiled against his lips widely, unaware of the energy he gave Billy, how each second of happiness he had was a tiny spark which fueled the blonde. “He’s really strong too--” Steve grinned, tried to keep talking as Billy kissed him. “He’s like--half naked, all the time, so you can see *everything*-- ” Steve squeezed his thighs against Billy’s hips, pulled him down slowly.

“But he says I’m his...and I am.” Steve smiled brightly. Billy had seen Steve like this at school, in the very beginning of the year when he was still with Nancy. It wasn’t at all like that look he had the night of the Snow Ball, this was just for Billy. It looked like Steve was going to burst and Billy could *feel* him actually doing that, just as clearly as one could see small bursts of fireworks in the night sky. It wasn’t just hearing Steve say he loved Billy, or the tender teasing he used to explore the blonde’s body. Billy could *feel* just how much Steve loved him.

Each word and touch from Steve seemed to relax *and* fuel Billy. He chuckled, but it was interrupted as Steve pulled him down so that they were touching. He eased himself onto his elbows instead of his hands. It gave him more leverage and let him kiss Steve with a lot more ease. His breath ghosted over Steve’s lips before he kissed his cheek, his browline, his forehead--anywhere that he could reach without actually pulling away.

“I love you,” Billy murmured, pressing another kiss right below his ear. He repeated those three words in between each kiss that he

placed on Steve's jaw, his cheek, and then his lips again. The warmth that kept cascading into his body and dancing along the top of his skin made him shiver and sink further against Steve's body. If Billy wasn't addicted to Steve before, he was now.

With each word, Steve's love for Billy swelled as he laughed, flushed slightly as Billy kept up his ministrations. He felt so light at his love and he bit his lower lip before Billy claimed his mouth again. Steve couldn't recall feeling this way with Nancy. As much as he loved her, poured his heart into their relationship, she was always hesitant, and Steve had to constantly chase after her. When she broke Steve's heart, those pieces came together, made sense that they just weren't meant to be together. He accepted that, maybe quicker than either of them expected.

But Billy was so different. Billy met him halfway, challenged him, and appreciated him in return. He could rely on Billy, share with him the most intimate parts of himself—and not be judged for it. Steve moaned quietly into Billy's mouth, that pleasure once again thrumming low at his spine and spreading slowly throughout his body. It twitched a little every time Billy caressed his skin, tilted Steve's head to deepen their kiss. It made some part of Steve appreciate that power, because it gave him the ability to experience new sensations with Billy, a new depth that was unique and reserved for his time and love with Billy Hargrove.

A sharp knock at the door made Steve jerk under Billy in surprise. Hopper. God, he didn't want to talk to them. Steve was still so exhausted and all he wanted to do was sleep for a week.

Billy leaned back after Steve broke the kiss and glanced over his shoulder. He slowly pushed himself up and off of Steve. It was obvious that this was going to be difficult, but Billy guessed Hopper was going to have both of them talk. He didn't know about either of them, although El may have clued him into some of what was going on. He climbed off of the bed and offered Steve his hand.

"Come on, Steve. We gotta do this," Billy didn't mind being there for Steve, although he wouldn't admit that he was just as nervous. He didn't talk to people in *general*, so being forced to talk about the lab? Not really something he wanted to do, but the officer needed to

know. Otherwise, how was the lab going to be shut down?

26. Chapter 26

Summary for the Chapter:

It's so short and fluffy!

Steve took his hand and allowed Billy to pull him up off the bed with a groan. Both of them were private people in their own way, Steve wore his heart on his sleeve, but didn't allow people to see his vulnerabilities. Billy just happened to see them, and now he supposed Hopper and El had too. It felt like too much and he felt a little sick, comparatively close to the first time Billy found him in the corner of his room.

Steve didn't expect them to be judgmental, though he certainly didn't want El, even in a harmless manner, to mention his nightmares to the other kids. No, it just made him feel weak. And now that basically everybody knew about him and Billy; this was yet another weakness. Steve zipped and buttoned his jeans, grabbed a shirt from off the floor, which might have been Billy's, since it was really large on him, and headed out slowly with the blonde. Hopper was in his chair and El sat on the couch. Steve sat down slowly, felt Hopper's gaze bore into him.

It was silent for a long time before El asked, "Do I have two brothers now?"

Unfortunately, Billy knew that nothing he could say would make this a lesser blow for either of them. It simply wasn't possible, but as he watched Steve sink down into the couch, he wished he could. Not knowing exactly what to do with himself, Billy stood off to the side. Steve would have to talk, and maybe Hopper would make him do the same. He wasn't sure, but he wasn't going to start the conversation.

When El spoke, Billy's eyes fell on her and he couldn't help the small smile he gave her. "That's up to Harrington, I guess."

"El, we need explanations to other things, first," Hopper sat at the kitchen table, his arms crossed over his chest as he observed the two teenagers in his living room. Shit had changed. Something had

happened. He could tell by the look in Steve's eyes and the way Billy's usual attitude was diminished. He had run ins with the Hargrove kid before the two of them were more... acquainted. Not positive ones, and the kid was usually spitting mad or scowling. Right now, he looked like he just existed. And Steve? Steve looked like he had seen some ghosts.

"We'll start with you, Steve," Hopper nodded and ignored the way Billy shifted on his feet. "Start from the beginning. What the hell happened to you?"

Steve raked his hands through his hair and did his best to force his hands back down to his lap. It was a nervous habit and unfortunately, a very obvious one. "Uh well, Billy was gone, missing, but I didn't—I thought he left. And Nancy said she didn't think he just left and I should...look at the note he left me. Which I did a-a lot and the kids decided to...look at it, too." God, he really had 12 year olds help him with his love life. Steve's shoulders slumped a little.

"And El...offered to find him using me." He hadn't wanted to use El, but now he wasn't going to throw the brats under the bus. "And she...found that he was in Hawkins Lab. They took him, and were using him to try to connect to the Upside-Down." Steve looked down at his lap and wished he was anywhere but there, preferably back in bed with Billy.

"Billy was with Papa. He's 13 now." El piped up suddenly, helpfully, though it just raised more questions than anything.

Hopper's brows furrowed and his lips creased. He watched Steve critically until El spoke up about Billy being 13 now. His eyes snapped to Billy, then, who had flinched and set his arms behind his back. Concern washed over him as he took in the two boys who should be playing basketball. Getting into arguments. Illegally drinking beer and watching movies. Not this shit.

"The lab's running again," Hopper repeated and then scowled. Hell. That was lovely. "How did you find him, Steve? El figured out where he was, but then what?"

For now, Hopper left the fact that Billy was 13 alone. And that

Brenner, El's 'papa,' was suddenly alive and well. He was sure that guy had gotten eaten. At least it didn't look like Billy was going to bolt. He stood stiffly, and his eyes were vacant, but he wasn't moving toward the door or trying to leave. He was staying with Steve. Apparently, the kid wasn't letting go, like Hopper discussed with him before.

Now, Steve wasn't a very good liar, never had been, but this he needed to be careful about. Hopper knew when people were lying as part of his job, so there had be the perfect balance of truth and omission. "After we knew...Billy was in the lab, the kids, suggested using the tunnels to kinda sneak in. So I...went to the where the fields were, where the kids and I went down the first time, and I....fought one of those--those demodogs, the kids call them that," Steve supplied to Hopper, not that it mattered, "And then I had these powers and got Billy out."

Steve struggled to think of what he would say when pressed for more questions, it wasn't just going to be this simple, just accepted like that. But even he didn't have the full explanation, he just now knew he felt the same sensations as Billy described them and when Billy healed him, there was that warmth. There was no rational explanation for irrational happenings.

He could feel Billy watching him carefully, at first because Billy was worried, but Billy knew him well now too. He was being scrutinized under both pairs of eyes. So Steve kept his own gaze turned down, willed this discussion over.

Of course, Hopper wasn't an idiot and knew where he needed to dig, even if it was uncomfortable. He had to get all of the information in order for him to have a proper understanding of what happened. If he didn't, it could always fuck them over later.

"Those tunnels are underneath the entire town, Harrington," Hopper frowned. "How did you know which tunnel to take? Where you went in is miles away from the lab. Not to mention--'and then I had these powers' makes no actual sense."

This was a question Billy hadn't actually considered before. Steve had been there and he had gotten Billy out. That was all he knew or cared

about. How he did it, though? That never occurred to him. He glanced from Hopper to Steve and shifted his feet again.

Steve gave a little helpless shrug and nearly winced, tried to lean back into the sofa and craft his body language into something that wasn't so readable for either Billy or Hopper. "I mean, we weren't that far before, and we saw the direction they ran in when El closed the Gate. It wasn't like I was right outside the door where Billy was." Steve said, a touch defensive. No, he broke in down the hall, the same hall as Billy, under God knows how many stories underground.

The last thing Steve needed was for them to team up together against him. He could feel a tiny spark flicker in his spine, it came up with a lot of his emotions apparently. Steve started softly again, "One of them attacked me and I fought it. When I was fighting I just--I just fried it." Steve remembered when El saved them that night at the Byers, from the hoard of dogs that swarmed to kill them. They could surmise what happened to Steve when one grabbed him. He'd already talked about it with Billy and that was enough. Steve bounced his leg a little, grew increasingly uncomfortable with each passing second.

"You're lying to both of us, you know," Billy cut in, his voice surprisingly monotone for how irritated he began to look. "Just. Answer the question, Steve. It's just us. It's not like we're going to judge you."

Hopper looked between the two and shook his head. "Billy is right. You're not answering the question. But I get it, kid. I'll just move my questions to Billy." His gaze fell on the blonde, who tensed and clenched his jaw.

"El called you thirteen. Explain that to me."

Billy stared at him and felt that same crawling under his skin like he had during the experiments. He looked away from Hopper, his gaze jumping around the cabin before he seemed to build up whatever courage he needed to actually talk.

"They shot me full of shit. Don't ask me what it was because I don't know. Then, they tortured me until I could..." Billy shrugged and his skin started to run cold. He knew why Steve didn't want to talk. He

knew it was hard, especially when Hopper's eyes bore into him.

"Obviously, Harrington has something with electricity. What can you do, Billy?" Hopper was staying away from calling Billy 'Hargrove' because of his dad, like he'd done before. It was nice, but Billy still felt on edge.

"I can heal injuries really fast," Billy worked his jaw and thought about the man on the floor, screaming, as his bones shattered and exploded beneath his skin.

Steve glanced up at Billy once and fought the urge to grab him and pull the blonde beside him on the couch. Even if everybody knew they were together, Billy was probably going to have to be the one to initiate all that. But Billy was such a private person, so he couldn't stop himself from interjecting, "He can heal people too, heal injuries really fast." It almost sounded like a cross between bragging about Billy and defending him, when he told Hopper just how valuable Billy was and what he could do.

"Thirteen means Billy is my brother for sure, Steve doesn't have a tattoo, but Billy does." El supplied, "Papa gave him that, and now he can do things just like me."

Steve sighed heavily and really wanted to crawl back into bed. Some things Hopper and the others just didn't need to know, like Billy's torture. Billy had to keep those details to himself, especially right now. He couldn't be forced to just share that.

"I just--I grabbed Billy and we ran down the hall, and--" Steve stopped, since none of it was a dream that meant the dog on the surface was real. The one who attacked that man. Was that...a way that the Gate opened? Just one being out? Steve blanched at the thought, felt a little sick, and another spark rise inside him.

Steve coming to Billy's defense made him hold his breath. He dropped his gaze to the floor and couldn't bring himself to look at anyone at this point. All he actually wanted to do was not engage, not listen, not be there. He rolled his lower lip between his teeth and bit down.

“Thank you, El,” Hopper smiled at her and he looked back at Steve. “And what, Harrington? Look. I need details. We need to know what we’re dealing with so we can fix it.”

“Those things--demodogs--they’re around,” Billy offered and flinched at the look Hopper shot him.

“They’re back?” Hopper clenched his jaw and shook his head. “Damn. We’re going to have to figure out where they’re coming from. How they got through again.”

Billy glanced at Steve. He had said it to derail whatever Hopper was trying to find out from Steve. It managed to work, at least, for now.

“El? Do you feel if the gate is completely open or are we dealing with strays?” Which, Hopper realized, wouldn’t make sense. The things died as soon as the gate closed.

She frowned a moment, “I can feel it, it’s open again. He’s not back, not yet, but there’s an opening. Before there were some others in the tunnels, but then--” She looked over at Steve, and it was as if she could see Steve fighting it. Maybe she could, Steve didn’t know, but the look all but confirmed what he already felt deep down in his gut: Steve fucked up and opened the Upside-Down. Her gaze on him was intense and unwavering, like she could see every single bit of his soul and the darkness there, all his fear and anxieties.

Steve felt sick to his stomach and stood up abruptly, knocking into the coffee table. “I-I need some air--” He stumbled a little, the lights that Hopper put back in flickered as Steve passed them and Steve wanted to cry seeing it. Jesus Christ, that was a fucking cosmic joke if there ever was one. Steve didn’t wait for the go-ahead from any of them when he stepped outside. It was freezing outside, but Steve welcomed the frigid air on his skin.

He knew it; he knew it from the moment he saw the demodog attack that man. It was all his fault. The one thing Steve wanted to be over more than anything in his entire life and it was just back. And he had done it. Steve brought his hands to his face as he felt a slight breeze blow snowflakes over his arms. They quickly melted on his heated skin.

Hopper didn't try to stop Steve, but Billy reached out for just a second. He dropped his arm, though, and watched Steve leave. He glanced up as the lights flickered and then his eyes wandered to Hopper. His lips thinned and he walked forward.

"Cigarettes," Billy muttered. He hadn't had one..in a week? A little over? Hopper, thank god, didn't argue, and handed him his pack and a lighter. Billy turned and walked out of the cabin. The chill immediately made him shiver. It didn't deter him, though, and he stepped up beside Steve.

Billy didn't talk. He didn't think he needed to. Instead, he pulled out a cigarette and set it on his lips. He lit it and as he breathed in, the roughness of it almost made him choke. Oh, fuck. It had been too long. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and coughed. It only lasted a couple of seconds, though, and he was back to breathing the nicotine in.

When Billy reached out with his free hand, he brushed his knuckles across Steve's forearm. He felt the small shocks of electricity ride along his skin and shivered again. Still, he waited for Steve to talk. If he wanted to, he would. If he didn't, maybe Billy would coax him later. Until then, he offered the lit cigarette to Steve.

Steve shuddered softly when Billy touched him, it wasn't strong enough to hurt him, and Steve appreciated the contact. He lowered his arms slowly but didn't look at Billy's face when he wordlessly took the cigarette. His hands shook a little as he inhaled, way too deeply compared to what he was used to. Steve did cough hard then, grimaced in pain, as he pressed the cigarette back over to Billy. But the pain was grounding, brought him back to the moment.

He glanced over at Billy and swallowed. He wasn't sure what the say, did Billy even know what he was thinking? Steve was sure Billy would tell him it wasn't true or that it wasn't his fault. Maybe the last part was arguably true, but what Steve intended didn't matter. Steve opened the gate again, having fucking contact like that with that thing. Steve put everyone he ever knew or loved all at risk. His eyes watered, what day was it? They were so close to Christmas and Billy told him, this holiday, and the next. Jobs. An apartment. Together. Steve didn't realize he was finally crying until he felt his face burn

from the tears on his cheeks. He'd risked the entire world for Billy Hargrove, and he would do it all over again.

Billy took the cigarette back and didn't say anything about Steve coughing on it, not like he had when they first actually talked. He took another drag of it and glanced over. Then, Billy flinched. Steve was crying and fuck Billy wasn't sure what to do. He shifted on his feet and then flicked the cigarette to the ground. Slowly, so Steve wouldn't startle, Billy wrapped his arms around him and tugged him against his chest.

"I've got you," Billy murmured. It didn't matter that Steve was a little taller. He tangled his fingers into Steve's hair and held him tightly. "It's okay, babe. It's okay." He wasn't even sure what it was, but clearly, Steve was thinking about something. He turned his head and pressed a kiss to Steve's cheek.

But Steve clutched at him desperately, pressed his face into the blonde's neck, as his fingers grabbed at Billy's back. Steve let out a shuddering gasp, he would have to tell Billy this, all of them this. Steve wouldn't be able to keep this inside. It was too dangerous. But that it was him to ruin all of this for them, to inevitably drag the kids back into this shit? It was unacceptable and there was nothing he could do to make it right, other than help close the Gate.

Steve whispered harshly through a soft sob, "I just love you so fucking much, you know?" As if saying that explained things, but of course, they did to Steve in that moment. "I would do...anything I could to..." And that was it, that was the biggest insult to everyone else. That Steve wasn't even sorry. He would've never been able to get to Billy otherwise, no matter the plan the kids came up with.

Billy went pliant as Steve clutched to him. Part of him hated that it was so habitual now, but the other part knew it was what Steve needed. He drug his fingertips over Steve's scalp and tightened his hold around his waist with his other arm. With Steve so close, it wasn't really cold anymore. He could feel Steve's energy, his electricity, bouncing off of his skin and warming his blood.

"It's okay, Steve," Billy repeated and closed his eyes. Steve's energy burst behind his eyelids and he sank further into Steve's arms as he

let it surround him. He wouldn't do this with anyone else. It was only Steve who he wanted like this. "I love you, too. It's okay. It'll be okay. We'll figure this shit out."

Steve wondered if they would hate him, if the kids would hate him--especially Dustin. It wasn't as if Steve wasn't aware that he didn't do it on purpose, but even still, now they would all have to deal with it. It was unavoidable. Steve clutched hard a Billy's broad shoulders, it was better that it was Billy first. However the blonde dealt with it, it was his opinion that mattered to Steve the most.

His voice shook and he harshly whispered as he grasped at Billy's back, "I think it was me, it was me who opened--when I fought it like that and its blood was inside me...I opened the Gate." As soon as it was out in the world, Steve knew it was true. He closed his eyes tightly and pressed his forehead against Billy's collarbone, all his nightmares were coming true and it was just too damn much. All he wanted was for everything to slow down, to have some time alone with Billy, for them to just enjoy each other and be normal.

"Okay," Billy hesitated and pressed another kiss to Steve's head. "You... didn't do it on purpose, and even though it is, we'll figure it out. You all did the first time, right? And..." He hesitated as he thought about the lab, the tank, the constant pressure to find this world. "Steve... if you hadn't, I would have eventually. They were getting tired of me failing." Those were the worst punishments. Coming out of that tank, having not reached the Upside Down? Brenner was never happy with that. He thought that if they tortured him more, if they pushed him more, he was more likely to reach it. Billy wasn't sure if that was true.

"You know..." Billy smiled a bit, "I love how the electricity feels on my skin. It feels nice. It reminds me that I'm alive." Even if he was only trying to distract Steve, he wasn't lying. It felt nice to have Steve's energy thrumming around him.

Steve pulled his head back in surprise and sniffled a little, he knew Billy was trying to distract him, but it was genuinely surprising. "You do? You said...you could see it. Does it really look that different compared to everybody else?" Steve interlocked their fingers and Billy could feel that electricity strongly there. It hurt Billy before, so

he was surprised there was anything nice or exciting about it. He squeezed Billy's hand softly and sighed.

He felt so exhausted standing there with Billy. When were they going to have time to themselves? Billy was being so kind to him again, and he knew it was a strain for him, to constantly tend and care for Steve. Steve inhaled shakily, willed himself to get it together. He would have to deal with the fall out, regardless of any tears. It was just so hard to have it be the Gate, of all things, and him at the center.

"Mm," Billy nodded and smiled more as Steve pulled back. He slid his hand from Steve's hair to his face and stroked his fingers over his cheek. He watched him quietly for a while, as if he was deciding how to explain what he saw to him. It wasn't difficult, per se, but he knew that the way he spoke about Steve, about his energy, would show how much he was fucking infatuated with him.

"They... other people are stagnant," Billy ran his thumb over Steve's lower lip and felt his body warm. "Yours... it bursts. It's glitter-like. Bright." He leaned in and pressed his mouth over Steve's. As he did, he closed his eyes and smiled. It interrupted the kiss, sure, but Billy was okay with that. "And I don't know why," Billy continued, talking against Steve's lips, "but our... our energy pulls together. It's like there's a draw or something." He didn't mind, of course, but it was strange.

Steve smiled and laughed softly against his lips until Billy mentioned them pulling together. He looked down once and swallowed. Steve gripped his hand a little harder and glanced up once at Billy's searching expression before he slowly drew Billy back into an embrace. It felt different this time, different from when Billy held Steve, and he was sure Billy felt it.

He started out slowly, kept his hold on him firm, because now it was going to be him holding Billy. "I think it's because...we're connected, somehow, or were. When you talked about the cold and the hot and the pain---that's what happened to me, Billy." Steve whispered, tightened his grip a little more. "I found you after I dreamed about you and I felt this cold pull all over me...just...just like when you healed me, babe."

Billy blinked as he was pulled in and then tensed as Steve spoke. Fear settled into his stomach and he opened his mouth and then closed it. The dream? He had dreamed a lot about Steve. The only two times where they weren't okay? It was with El and the other--the other was when it was dark. Everything was dark but the bed. Oh.

"I..." Billy felt himself begin to stutter and he tried to keep the panic squelched in his gut. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I didn't--wait." It seemed that he was starting to connect the dots, and as he did, he began to pull away from Steve. "You found me because of it, didn't you? That's how you--the tunnels--" Billy seemed to have lost himself in thought, and his stomach clenched. If he hadn't had that dream, would Steve have found him? "I'm sorry," he repeated because he knew the cold hurt. He knew it was like an out-of-body experience.

Steve held onto Billy tightly and shook his head. "It wasn't my fault, wasn't your fault, like you said. I'm not...I'm not angry. It was what I needed to get you out and you didn't know...it pulled me right towards you. I felt sick if I stopped, and I didn't know what was happening except to follow it. But I didn't feel hot until I was down there. I don't know what it was but it was like...the air hung around me, over me, and I couldn't breathe it was so hot. And I took off that stupid face mask, and then I was really close to you and....it attacked me."

He wouldn't let Billy go, not now when Steve told him about all this. He didn't want Billy to think that Steve was scared of him again, that he was angry. Steve truly wasn't. It needed to happen or it was supposed to happen. Steve felt settled by that fact and he reached up and tangled his fingers in Billy's hair. "It's alright, I know you would never...try to hurt me on purpose. You didn't know what would happen. But what matters is we're both out and alive and I...have to explain this to everyone." Steve moved his head to kiss along the side of Billy's face. At least it was out, the opinion that mattered the most.

Billy pressed his lips together, obviously determined to stay quiet as his thoughts began to bounce in his skull. He'd transferred some of the shit inside of him to Steve. He had brought him through the tunnels and, inadvertently, gotten Steve attacked. It was hard not to believe it wasn't his fault, that what Steve went through was on his shoulders. He shivered as Steve began to kiss over his face and closed

his eyes.

"I-I don't know if this... this is meaningful, but... If Eleven closed the gate before... just her? There's--there's three of us now. It should... be easier, right?" Billy still hadn't opened his eyes. He allowed himself to just drown in the bright glitz of Steve's energy. It calmed him down enough that he wasn't panicking, at least.

"I don't know, honestly, I don't even know how to control any of this. Right now it's just not...built up, so I can't really use it like before. I don't know how any of this works, but I'll have to try to do it right." Steve murmured against his skin, his fingers gently slid into the nape of Billy's neck. He wouldn't be able to sit on the sidelines, couldn't even try to like before. Perhaps having this shit was for the best then. It was going to be his best defense against whatever happened to them in the future, whatever he did. Steve was tired of crying about it; he loved Billy. Billy loved him back and wasn't about to leave him. They were both going to be fucked up together. So what else was new?

Steve gently butted his head against Billy's, drew him out of his thoughts. Steve didn't withdraw though, pondered what Billy said to him about this energy. "Think of all the money we'll save on our electric bill and going to the doctor when we finally get our place," Steve joked weakly. "C'mon Hargrove, we gotta wrap his shit up and go to sleep. I'm fucking cold out here, and I still need about another 12 hours asleep on you."

Billy shivered as Steve's fingers moved over his neck. Steve was right. It was cold, and he was exhausted. He wasn't sure about sleeping for twelve hours, but he could certainly use more of it. Before Steve had his nightmare, Billy had been sleeping better than he had all week. It wasn't surprising, of course, but he wouldn't mind crawling into a warm bed and tucking himself against Steve's body. Fuck, he had dreamed about that all week.

"We'll figure all this shit out later," Billy agreed after scoffing about Steve butting their heads together. Honestly. He dropped his hands down to squeeze Steve's sides. He didn't want to admit that his body warmed or that his heart stuttered when Steve mentioned getting a place together. He didn't want Steve to know that he had been

worried about being alone again. Billy had been a loner before, but now? After what had happened? He didn't want to be alone.

Billy knew he'd have to tackle his fear of being alone later. He could already feel his gut twisting at the idea and he had to ignore it. Instead, he reached up and tangled his fingers with Steve's. "Come on, babe." He tugged him into the cabin and ignored Hopper's stare as he passed him.

"No funny business on my bed, you two," Hopper called and Billy almost choked. His face turned red as he slipped into the room and pushed the door almost all the way closed after Steve followed.

Steve wasn't sure how much Hopper heard or how loud they were being outside, but clearly there were thin walls. Steve's eyebrows shot in his hair and even though a smart ass retort of "what about the shower?" danced on his tongue, he flushed deeply as well and barked out an uncomfortable laugh as he looked at Billy. Steve couldn't exactly say to Hopper that he would "try his best."

So instead, Steve hurriedly dragged Billy to the bed and yanked the blankets back over them. He hadn't even realized how hard he was shaking until he pressed himself against Billy's body. The guy was always unreasonably warm. When he could hear El softly reason with Hopper that she had to have two brothers now, Steve groaned and pressed his face into Billy's neck, grabbed the blonde's arm to cover his own head, as if somehow Billy was going to block the embarrassment.

Billy didn't mind being pulled by Steve. In fact, it was a welcoming difference from Steve being afraid to touch him. He wrapped one of his arms around Steve's waist while the other was used to hide his face. His own lips were quirked. He didn't mind El's fascination with them being her brothers. It didn't make him feel strange, although maybe it should. He wasn't sure.

"I'm proud of you," Billy suddenly murmured. He moved his arm so he could look at Steve and his smile grew. "That was hard, yeah?" It seemed normal to have Billy concentrate on Steve, to think about anything but himself. It was easier, at least.

Without missing a beat, Billy sat up and peeled his shirt off. He dropped it to the side of the bed and then returned to Steve, wrapping his arms around his waist and pulling him close to his body. He knew that he normally ran warm, but now? With whatever was below his skin? He was like a damned furnace. He could still feel small bursts of Steve's electricity along his skin and it made him curl closer. Steve may not like it--but Billy? He did.

Steve relished the heat and his fingers gently roamed over Billy's skin in an attempt to warm up and touch the other. When Billy pulled him close, he inhaled the other boy deeply, smiled into his neck. It wasn't like Steve really had a choice, but he took the compliment at face value and enjoyed the praise. "I wouldn't have been able to without you there, ass..." Steve mumbled, pressed his nose against Billy's neck before he kissed at his pulse. It was soft at first before Steve began sucking at the skin there, his fingers pressed firmly into Billy's skin. When he moved back, Steve watched the mark disappear as quickly as he made it.

He still had to be careful, apparently everything they did was heard, and Steve knew he wouldn't be able to keep quiet enough not to deeply humiliate himself. "I'm going to have to get like, a gag or something," Steve muttered in a tone that was both slightly embarrassed and self-deprecating. But that would be later, now, exhaustion pulled him down under the warmth of Billy's embrace, lulled him to sleep.

His fingers danced across Billy's skin leisurely, ghosted over a small scar there. "You feel so amazing..." Billy was all muscle and there was so much power that always appealed to some hidden part of Steve, but feeling his warmth now and as long as he was without Billy's body, the comment came across as adoration and worship more than anything else.

Billy ran one of his hands through Steve's hair. He tangled his fingers there and shivered as Steve's hands and mouth explored his body. He let his mind wander as he squelched random small fires of panic in his gut. It was strange how, even here with Steve, his brain tried to pull him back to his cell and the people who had touched him there. It wasn't the same at all, though. Steve touched him almost in awe. It wasn't to harm him, and he knew that, but it was still hard to

differentiate. Maybe he would with time.

It was easy to snap out of his thoughts when Steve mentioned a gag, and he chuckled at that. Honestly, he didn't expect any less. Still, it startled him enough that he had blinked and given Steve a surprised look. It melted into something obscenely affectionate, though, at the comment and he tugged gently at Steve's hair in response. He knew he had to get better at talking, especially after what had happened to him. Maybe bits and pieces would be okay? There was no way he'd feel comfortable puking his guts to Steve, but he had to start somewhere. At least, they had started earlier. It seemed to go okay.

"I-I keep thinking," Billy hesitated and pressed his lips to Steve's forehead. He stared at the wall. "I know it's you touching me. I know that, but I..." Maybe Steve would understand. Maybe he would know that Billy was desperate for his hands, desperate for his affection, but he was still fighting the jerks of panic in his gut. Finally, Billy settled on, "I love it when you touch me," instead, his arm tightening around Steve's waist.

Steve was quiet for a long time and swallowed, it was something he hadn't considered, and even though Billy didn't finish, he could piece together the gaps. "Just...tell me if it gets too much or if you only want to touch me. I'll hold onto the bed or something, whatever you want...I can do that." But for now, Steve held onto Billy, his eyelashes fluttered closed against his neck. Steve was still terrified to hurt him, so he had no issues relinquishing control and allowing Billy to guide and direct him as needed. In fact, with how out of control his life felt, Steve would feel more secure by the notion.

He didn't want Billy to argue to him, or force himself to do anything that made Billy uncomfortable, so he continued, "I love it when you touch me too, anyway, so I'd be happy to do it and you wouldn't have to stop. You're the only one who's touched me like that, like you're sweeping me off my feet..." Steve couldn't stop the smile from forming on his face and he knew Billy felt it against his skin, but it was true.

Billy's touch was overwhelming in the best way and Steve didn't fight it. He typically liked to give into the sensations, the emotion of the moment, but the emotions were so intense with Billy that everything

was amplified. Steve felt a small pulse inside him just thinking of that, like the pleasant memory of Billy's hands. Billy still felt the hands of other people, so it made sense to Steve to give Billy a chance to feel something for himself. Steve wasn't going anywhere and neither was Billy, so Steve would be ready to press against the blonde when the time came. When Billy was ready.

Leave it to Steve to be completely and utterly understanding. Leave it to him to make Billy feel okay about his fear, about the way his heart hammered against his chest every time Steve's fingers brushed over him. He squeezed Steve closer to his body and buried his face into Steve's neck. His fingers dug into Steve's back, and for the first time since they had actually gotten back together, Billy melted into Steve--completely. He didn't flinch or cower or worry about what he was doing or even think at that point.

"I love you," Billy mumbled against Steve's skin. He breathed him in, and even with that charge that Steve carried around with him now, Billy still loved the way Steve smelled, felt, breathed. Being away from him was essentially like having a part of his own body being cut off and thrown away. It was too much. "Every time I couldn't take anymore. Every... I just thought of you. I thought of us. I was--I was sure I wouldn't see you again, but all I needed to do was think about you."

Billy felt raw. He felt raw and for the first time, he was... okay with that.

Steve let Billy talk, press into him, and he pressed back for now in return. He whispered, "I want you...to know that I'm always gonna be with you, even if I'm not there, okay? When things are really fucked up with me and I can't--can't breathe, you being there makes it okay. I want it to be okay for you, too." Steve never regretted following electricity, and it was ironic now, but he knew that no matter what, Nancy Wheeler made him a better person. Billy Hargrove did too.

He took Billy's hand, but instead of interlocking their fingers, Steve pressed the pads of their fingertips together. It was strangely harder and easier than he expected, letting just a trickle come out when a dam wanted to overflow, but he concentrated for a moment and there was a small buzz of static electricity which caused the hair on both

their arms to stand up. Steve let out a small, breathless laugh. "Like--like this okay? That's how you make me feel, and what brought me to you, and you can feel it, too, now."

Dustin would have a field day when he found out what Steve could do. Steve was never going to live this down.

Billy nodded at the questions. He didn't speak, not yet, his breath choppy against Steve's skin as he held onto him. One day, he would feel like himself. Right now, that normal cockiness, that confidence, was gone. He knew it was sitting on a back burner, pushed down, but not extinguished. Eventually, he would be able to pull it back, coax it to the front again. Maybe Steve would eventually be the one to actually do that.

As the electricity danced along his arms, Billy laughed. He didn't think he could get closer to Steve, not physically, but that power beneath his skin was brought out by Steve's. It wrapped around the electricity and pulled it in. Billy muffled a small moan against his neck and squeezed his eyes shut. Obviously, Billy liked it, even if it had shocked the shit out of him earlier.

"I like it," Billy admitted, but he kept his face hidden and his body plastered against Steve's.

"I just gotta learn how to control it, not make you go flying into walls. Unless you piss me off." Steve laughed softly, of course Billy would have his own way of making Steve stop if he pissed Billy off. Control was going to be difficult. It was never one of Steve's strong suits, and for some reason, then he thought of his father and his own special disdain for Steve. But this was for Billy and the kids, not for his father or anybody else.

He sighed softly and interlocked their fingers again as he pressed close to Billy. It was hard to think a month or two ago he would be snuggled up against Billy Hargrove as opposed to getting his ass beat one way or another. Steve relaxed into the bed; he felt so heavy and he knew he was drifting. They were together and that was all that mattered. Steve turned his head and looked out the window. He could see the snow and he smiled softly, sleepily. "It's snowing..." Steve turned to face the window and brought Billy with him, draping

Billy over Steve's body so they could both watch. He was tired and just said the first thing that came to his sleep deprived mind, "I wanted to get you the dumbest sweater for Christmas, maybe something with a kitten on it in like...ahh, a Santa hat. That would have been good, Hargrove."

Billy scoffed at the idea of Steve doing that to him again. Steve may have issues controlling emotions, but he'd catch himself before he threw Billy into a wall like that (again). He tilted his head after he was drug over Steve's body and glanced out the window. Snow really wasn't a thing in Southern California. Billy had to admit--it was pretty.

"I'm not wearing a terrible Christmas sweater, Steve," Billy muttered. In reality, if Steve wrestled him down and made him, he wouldn't actually complain. Maybe he would. Actually, he definitely would complain, but he wouldn't take it off. If him wearing an ugly ass sweater is what made Steve happy, he'd do it (and glower the whole time). "And not a santa hat, either. Go to sleep." He brushed his fingers along Steve's scalp and closed his eyes.

Steve smile didn't waver. "Yeah, and I'm gonna take a Polaroid and blackmail you. So whenever you get too mouthy, I can say, 'Hey, remember the kitten sweater?,' and you'd be like: ooo, he's serious." Steve stroked Billy's arm gently as he drifted off, watched the snow fall and felt Billy's warm breath on the back of his neck. He yawned loudly once. Steve wanted to sleep, it was just hard to break up this moment. "Get you wasted on eggnog and then no more King Billy, no, Princess Steve shoved you right off the throne onto your nice ass." Steve chuckled at his own joke as he took Billy's hand. "I want a cape--and a crown...and a...scepter? But a cape most of all--and Henderson is my right hand man."

Steve finally closed his eyes, they were just too heavy to keep open, but that didn't stop him from talking. "And you're gonna make dinner, and I'm gonna eat it. Extra mashed potatoes. I hate Christmas but you'll make it alright. We have to go to the house, I got Dustin a...a video game and one of those pretty horses--the ponies, so he can just--just look at me--" Steve laughed a little and hummed into it, just rambling as he melted into the bed.

Billy laughed. He couldn't help it. Steve was fucking ridiculous. He gently tugged at his hair and pressed his lips along his neck and up to his jaw. He brushed a small kiss on the corner of Steve's mouth and squeezed Steve's body to his own. He doubted Steve would ever be able to beat him at drinking, and the idea of Steve with a cape? Or a crown and apparently a scepter? Jesus. He snorted and smoothed his fingers over Steve's scalp again.

"Go to sleep, babe," Billy mused. Steve was obviously sleep deprived, which was sobering for Billy. Neither of them had apparently slept while they were away from each other. He continued to stroke his fingers through Steve's hair. His other hand moved along his back and made little, massaging circles as he did.

Steve's brow furrowed for just a moment, but he kept his eyes closed, "I want blue, don't--don't be a dick and get me purple. Don't be a dick, Hargrove, I like blue. Mm, like your eyes, blue." Steve smiled and turned a little to face Billy, pressed his body flush against the blonde's to sleep, and entangled their limbs together again. It didn't take long for Billy to eventually hear Steve's heavy breathing. Every now and then Steve jerked slightly, tried to wake himself up to talk to Billy, before he was simply still and a heavy, familiar weight on top of the blonde.

He had so much difficulty sleeping before Billy was taken; a month of intense nightmares and panic attacks with Billy forced into the guest room. It was likely a testament to Steve's energy that he really hadn't been hallucinating, but clearly no wonder why Steve was convinced that was what was really happening. With Steve still, it was easy to see the dark circles under his eyes, his skin a little paler than usual. Though now, Steve was completely out of it and even snored softly. That energy was still there of course, but still, quietly building brighter inside him as Steve's fingers twitched a little on Billy's hip.

Billy stayed up for a while. He should probably feel like a creep watching Steve sleep, but he didn't care. Couldn't bring himself to. Not after being away. God, a week had felt so long. Hell, while he was in there, he wasn't even sure when a day passed. They'd kept him running, only managing to slow down for a couple of hours (he guessed?) to sleep. Eventually, Billy dozed off, but it was light. He wanted to be aware if Steve had a nightmare, but he also... didn't

sleep so well himself anymore.

Notes for the Chapter:

There will be so much fluff and smut, ya'll will beg for angst. (Don't worry, that's coming too)

27. Chapter 27

Summary for the Chapter:

Christmas fluff, finally complete with Joyce!

It took a great deal to convince Jim, but Joyce felt really pleased with herself as she straightened up the living room as quickly as possible, for quite possibly the fourth time today. Both Jonathan and Will were off in Will's room and she could hear music floating down the hall. When Will made it home after his slumber party at Steve's and recounted the entire tale, she hugged him extra hard, and exhaled loudly, kept it together for him even when her eyes became wet.

Joyce met Steve on several occasions, and even though she was aware of Jonathan and Steve having a few intense interactions, Jonathan assured her that it was fine, in his own quiet way. Steve often hung around for the children, sometimes talked to Jonathan about music, though she could tell by the blank expression on her son's face that their tastes weren't exactly similar, no matter how animated Steve got as he tried to pull Jonathan into agreeing with him. Steve was very different from his parents, who Joyce remembered from her own days in high school.

Steve's father, Thomas or Tom, was popular, just as she was aware by looking at Steve, that he was also likely popular. But Tom could be cold, cruel, and distant--and that was when he *liked* you. Steve's mother, Pamela, had been practically perfect. Always coiffed and a little high strung. She was kinder than Tom, much kinder, but always pushed herself for more, no matter the cost to her or anybody around her. Joyce had been on the end of more than a few painful jabs by Pam's circle of friends, who she continuously traded up until she was at the top of the high school pyramid. But Joyce could rarely recall her as the instigator, simply joined in on the giggling and taunts. So the first time Joyce officially met Steve, watched him bark at kids who were clearly running circles around him and pushing him to his brink, none of it clicked for her.

Steve seemed to do well, even when he was a little frazzled, and allowed the kids to poke and prod at him until he caved to their

demands. It wasn't long after that she discovered that Steve used to date Nancy, but the teenager seemed to hold no animosity towards her son, and in Joyce's mind then, he was already a kid she didn't want to underestimate or undervalue. The more that Steve came around to collect Will, the more she saw that tender side to him, even as he yelled at the kids to stop destroying her living room. Jonathan simply told her that Steve was different and left it at that.

Meeting Billy was an entirely different matter. The handsome young man had been charming to the extreme and Joyce had already heard about him from Karen Wheeler, and about the beating that Steve took from the other children, so she felt more than adequately prepared to deal with that special brand of bullshit Billy dished out. She rebuffed and enjoyed challenging him, after all, she no longer succumbed to those kind of charms. She learned that lesson after Lonnie. And when she wasn't going to be so easily swayed, Billy seemed unnerved and hung out around Steve, a little too close, a few too many touches, even when he snapped at Mike or Dustin for playing a little too roughly.

Will watched the pair closely, very closely. It was a small town, but Joyce Byers wasn't a small minded person, so she paid their intimacy no mind. They seemed happy with each other, if unsure of themselves. They were teenagers, and if nothing else, it settled something deep inside Joyce for Will. It would do him good to see what he *could* have, and not just what he was *expected* to have.

To say that Hop was going crazy was the understatement of the year. At first he said the boys "stole" his bedroom in his own home, specifically he said it gruffly and under his breath, as if he was on his last nerve and the last cigarette in his pack. When she suggested that Hop just put them out on the living room floor, Hop conceded they offered, but since there were two of them and one of him, it didn't make any damn sense for him to not sleep on the couch. She recalled giving him an incredulous look and then understood they were having a conversation just for Hop to complain to her about all the teenagers running around his small cabin. She understood that.

But when Christmas approached and Hop admitted to having no plans, his first real Christmas with El as his daughter, Joyce put her foot down. The boys would stay with her until the New Year, Hopper

would spend Christmas with El, and Christmas Eve was going to be hosted at the Byers' residence. There was no room for argument and all she received from Hopper was a long, suffering sigh for her trouble. She just hoped she had enough food for everyone and the Christmas lights glittered on the tree--thankfully in just one part of the house this year.

The strangest part for Billy was the *atmosphere*. It threw him off. For years, he had spent Christmas in his room after being forced to play family. Now? He was trying to avoid touching and being close to people in the living room, which was open to the kitchen, so running away wasn't a damned option. He leaned against the kitchen counter, instead, fiddling with one of the cookies that Joyce had made. They were delicious, he had to admit that, but with his attention on everything going on in front of him, the treat was sort of forgotten.

Steve looked better. They had slept the last couple of nights and the rings under his eyes had lightened. He smiled more, even if he sometimes became frustrated with the electricity that coursed through his veins. Billy, in all honesty, thought it was damned attractive. Sure, he didn't want to get shocked into oblivion, but Steve had indulged him a couple of times and let it run over his skin. Billy always shivered and curled tighter around his body.

Thinking about it made Billy's cheeks warm. He stuffed the cookie into his mouth and ignored the glances from the kids. Billy had been quiet, but it was sort of expected, he guessed. That charm that Joyce had expected was gone. He didn't want to say that he wasn't... okay, but this didn't feel wrong to him because he was some sort of monster. No, he just never had this--not after his mom died.

Maybe Billy needed a cigarette. He looked over to Steve and couldn't help the warm smile that curled on his lips. It had been a while since he had seen the guy this relaxed. Leave it up to him to be okay around a huge amount of people and a lot of chatter.

Max had been ecstatic to see Billy, and that was very new for him. Max had been staying with the Byers following Billy's return; it just seemed like too much of a risk to have them all in one place. She tackled Billy as soon as he came through the door, and even though there were tears in her eyes, they also warned that Billy wasn't to

comment on them. Max would be moving back in with Susan after the new year and she had a lot of feelings about that, with Neil gone. But she had desperately missed Billy and led him over to the guest room, where Steve and Billy would now be. It was crowded but homey.

Max even showed him what she was working on in school and described the new tricks she could do on her skateboard, even though she had to find an area that wasn't so icy to do it. Max confided in Billy that she slipped several times on hidden patches of ice, but somehow the boys seemed to know how to walk on it and it infuriated her. She bounded around him, in a manner that she never had before due to his absence. And even when they weren't speaking and more people filtered into the home, Max threw a lot of glances Billy's way, ready to come over at a moment's notice to talk to him again.

Strangely though, it was Nancy that was the first person above the age of 13 to actually approach him. She stood by his side and poured them both a glass of eggnog with no comment. At Billy's look, she gave a little shrug and simply said, "You never know if she spiked it unless you try it." With that, she sipped the creamy drink and let her gaze wander back to the living room. Steve was trying very hard to convince Jonathan that he needed to really understand and *feel* Prince to appreciate him as an artist. Jonathan calmly stated like he didn't necessarily disagree but thought the conversation was pointless since "Purple Rain" was overplayed, which just made Steve talk faster. When Mike and Lucas raced past both of them about four times, Steve quickly reached out, grabbed Mike's collar, and yanked him onto the couch without missing a beat in the conversation.

Billy, of course, had entertained Max until so many of her friends were there that she became distracted enough to leave him be. He didn't mind, and he knew she'd be back to talk to him. His gaze flickered to Nancy and his stomach clenched as he watched her. Slowly, he reached over and took the eggnog from her. He sipped it and looked back over to the gaggle of nerds.

"Look," Billy shifted on his feet and then glanced back at Nancy. "Thanks... for talking to Steve. For having..." *For basically helping find me* . He didn't finish his sentence, though, because he didn't want to

fall back into a terrible mental state on Christmas Eve. It wouldn't be fair to Steve and Max. Hell, it wouldn't be fair to Joyce, who fluttered around, laughing and smiling with that motherly affection of hers. He turned away so that he was facing Nancy.

"Just, thanks... yeah?" Billy took another small drink of the eggnog. He was trying to ignore how much energy was vibrating around him. If he closed his eyes, the mess of colors looked like someone had thrown paint on a canvas and then shook it. He needed to get used to it, and he guessed talking to Nancy might help.

At this point, though, only Steve, Hopper, and El knew about what he could do. What he was capable of. He planned on keeping it that way.

Nancy took Billy in very carefully and Billy was well aware he was being appraised by her. Even though she was just Steve's ex, she still mattered to him a great deal to Steve and she was still a precious person to him. Just not like how she used to be. But then she gave Billy a little smile and spoke around the rim of her cup, "Of course, he was a mess without you. You make him really happy, Billy." And it sounded like maybe Steve was still a precious person to her as well. "Am I supposed to give you one of those 'don't you dare break his heart' speeches, or are we all set on that?" Her smile widened a little.

Dustin hadn't arrived to the house yet and they could both hear Steve's voice rising over the din in the living room that Michael Jackson was *the* most amazing artist of all time, and he would put that on his *goddamn grave*, because he wasn't about to put up with Jonathan's bullshit anymore, though Steve never stopped actually speaking with him. Jonathan didn't even look slightly fazed as he simply said that pop music was derivative and Steve was sent into a tizzy of curses. When Lucas and Mike jokingly said "language" at the same time, Steve whirled around with a glare that sent them both into a heap of laughter.

Billy raised his eyebrows at Nancy and then smirked. He drained some of the eggnog and managed a small shrug. "You're probably on a long list of people who would beat my ass if I hurt him." He looked away from her, over to Steve, and shook his head. "Although, I'd probably get through the list pretty easily." He shifted his hip against

the counter and finished his eggnog. "I'm gonna go say hi to him, though, before he kills a kid." He gave her another smirk before wandering off to where Steve and Jonathan were. He reached out and brushed his knuckles across Steve's forearm. "I'm gonna have to disagree with you, Steve. I agree with Byers over here." This would get Steve's attention, and his eyes, glittering with that knowledge, flickered to Jonathan.

"It is *freezing* out there!" The door had swung open just as Billy grinned at Jonathan. Dustin stepped in and pushed the door closed. The only parts of his face that was visible were his nose and eyes. The scarf felt like it was suffocating him and his ears were probably frostbit underneath his hat. His mom had insisted on him wearing the layers, and although he griped about it, he may or may not have to admit that it was a good idea. He stomped the snow off of his shoes and then began to unwrap himself.

"Your protoge is here," Billy mused.

Billy knew all of Steve's buttons to push, so it wasn't surprising when Steve whirled around then on Billy, his eyes alight with anger as he balked at Billy, one, disagreeing with him, two, siding with Jonathan, and three, doing so publicly. His voice was probably a little high when he yelled at Billy, "Really? Are you *kidding* me??" if they were in private, there probably would have been a bit of a snarky "babe" thrown in there for good measure, to let Billy know he was in for some shit, but that was before Dustin arrived.

Steve was up like a shot as soon as the door banged open and he started to move forward before he paused and then glanced at Billy. He raised an eyebrow and then darkly spoke, though there was no true malice in his voice, "We *are* going to speak about this later." His hand squeezed Billy's once, and there was a small, teasing spark there, just enough to give the blonde a tiny jolt, before Steve hurried to the front door.

Billy raised his eyebrows and licked his lips at Steve--that same stupid expression he threw at him on the court, tongue waggle and all. He laughed at the look he received and then tried not to choke as the spark of electricity climbed over his skin. He dragged his lower lip through his teeth and let his eyes drop to Steve's ass for just a

moment before turning to Jonathan. "You're welcome," he told him with a grin. He knew it was hard to get Steve to stop once he got going. Him saying that was going to get him into trouble later. For fucking sure. But maybe he didn't mind so much.

As Dustin tugged the hat off of his head, he caught a glimpse of Steve and grinned wide enough that his eyes almost closed. "Hey, asshole!" He launched himself forward and hugged Steve around his chest. Honestly, after that whole ordeal, Steve had almost traumatized Dustin. The idea of losing Steve, who he viewed as an older brother, had hit a little too close to home.

"Mother hen," Billy reminded Steve, and it was loud enough for *everyone* to hear. His smirk grew bigger as he walked off to the kitchen for more eggnog. The laughter and 'ooooh' from the kids made him almost laugh.

Steve hugged Dustin tightly, a wide smile on his face, and at Billy's comment, he flipped him off as Billy walked back into the kitchen, never once letting Dustin go. He could swear that the kid grew another inch in the short time they had been apart. "Ahhh you're getting stronger you little shit, nearly cracked a rib." Steve pulled away slowly before he ushered Dustin down the hall a little to the room he would stay in.

He couldn't stop smiling, it was always hard not to smile when Dustin looked at him like, cheesy, shit-eating grin. Steve reached up and tugged one of Dustin's curls softly. "You did it without me this time." Steve didn't comment on how the hat ruined it a little bit; some lessons the kid had to learn on his own. "It looks really good, man." Of all the kids, it wasn't surprising to anybody that he hung out with Dustin the most, not after everything they had been through. He cared about all of the kids, of course, but the little shit before him had a special place in his heart. What worried him though was he wasn't sure just how much he knew at this point and he braced himself for at least some questions.

Dustin looked over Steve, as if inspecting to see if he was still injured. He didn't know about Billy, and he was also in the dark about Steve's new quirk. Even if he was, he'd probably be checking Steve out to make sure he was okay, anyway. He glanced around and then tugged

Steve's polo until he was leaned almost all the way down. "Have you and Billy found the mistletoe yet?" He whispered and then snickered. He pushed Steve away, then, and grinned up at him. Of course, Dustin had questions. He distinctly remembered when Steve walked into the room, covered in muck and blood and smelling like the Upside Down.

But Dustin was also not stupid, and took pride in his patience.

"Jesus Christ, get your mind outta the goddamn gutter!" Steve hissed at him, even if that was one of the first things he had actually said to Billy that morning, teased him that he was gonna knock him breathless under the mistletoe for coming to the event, since Billy was clearly apprehensive. Steve sighed and frowned at Dustin before he sat down on the bed.

"I'm going to level with you, Billy's not going to want to talk to you about this, but I'm not Billy and we're...well, you're like my shitty little brother," Steve said in a little bit of a rush, since neither one of them had actually acknowledged anything like that before. "So I know you're going to have questions and I don't know what the fuck you know already, so now's the time to ask." The last thing Steve wanted was the kids badgering Billy and pushing him right out the front door. They meant well, but Billy wasn't even close to talking about his time in that place.

Dustin hesitated. He didn't care if Steve yelled at him. He was used to that, but asking questions? He climbed onto the bed next to him and hummed dramatically. "Real tense here, Steve," he warned him with another one of his cheeky smiles, although it was slightly warmer than usual. He looked away and shrugged.

"I guess my first question is how the hell you got out of there alive," Dustin frowned. "You both looked... like shit when we saw you. And you had all of this..." He gestured to his own body and made a face. "You look like you got thrown up on by an orc."

"That's a more...complicated question than it seems, man. I--wait, an orc is that thing from the game? Gross." But not that dissimilar from what he was covered with. "I got out of there alive because...after I went through the tunnels to get Billy, kinda-kind of like how we talked

about, one of the demodogs was on the surface and attacked somebody.” Steve licked his lips. He left out so much of it to get to that point, but it was honestly hard to know where to begin and still respect Billy’s privacy.

“Billy and I went back through the tunnels, like the way that I came, to get out, and then we drove to the house.” Clearly not the important part, Dustin knew that part. Steve started bouncing on his legs. “And I looked the way that I did before I...kinda came across a demodog first.”

“You came across a demodog,” Dustin said slowly, as if he was calling Steve stupid. He glared at him and shook his head. “You had like, *buckets* of blood in your sweatshirt, but you were walking and alive, so...” He shrugged again and looked at Steve. “How’d you get away from the demodog, then? And how were you walking if you were all bloody and shit? I mean, Billy didn’t look any better. But there was a lot of blood on *both* of you to be, y’know, *alive* .”

Dustin had a point. Steve’s sweater had been soaked in muck, grime and blood. He had latched onto Billy in that room, and that just added to the mess. Dustin was observant, and he had also noticed how Billy’s scrubs were torn by his shoulder and it, too, was matted in blood. The shredding of the clothes screamed *demodog* , too. Yet, he walked around like nothing was wrong, like nothing had happened.

All of a sudden, Dustin’s eyes brightened. “Oh, man. If El called Billy *brother* --does that mean--” he squinted at Steve. “Wait. Do you have some awesome power, too? Does Billy? Is that how you got out? ‘Cause I’m starting to think there’s more to this than you’re letting on.”

Steve really wished he had discussed this earlier with Billy. He tried to, really, but bringing up the lab was no easy matter and he wasn’t sure what he where one of Billy’s limits were. But Dustin was a smart brat, *his* smart brat, so this wasn’t going to be something Dustin didn’t figure out.

He placed his hands on Dustin’s shoulders. “Henderson, I’m going to need you to be really fucking calm, like really calm. But yes...yeah

that happened. Billy can heal and...heal other people, too.” Steve said it in a rush, it was the least frightening thing about Billy’s powers and all Dustin needed to know for now. “So I might not have...made it, if he wasn’t there.” Steve also wasn’t about to describe the demodog attacking and eating at him, the kid didn’t need his own special set of nightmares.

Dustin’s eyes popped wide and he stared at Steve. His brain was obviously going, though, as he thought about the idea of Billy being able to heal people. “So like... a Druid or a Cleric,” then, apparently, Dustin thought better of it and huffed at Steve. “In Dungeons and Dragons, that is. He’s the one on the team who can keep everyone from dying.”

Realization seemed to dawn on the middle schooler and he frowned. “Is Billy going to kill you for telling me about that? Oh, shit. Steve--did you *ask* him if you could tell me? ‘Cause if you didn’t, he might actually kill you. And I don’t think he’d heal you.” He scrunched his nose up and thought about the way Billy had gone all-out on Steve that night at the Byers’. They were together, though, right? So it wasn’t like Billy would actually *hurt* Steve if Dustin knew about it.

Billy was also unpredictable sometimes, though.

Steve scowled, “Of course he’s not going to hurt me!” Steve was 90% sure. Be pissed at him, maybe, but Steve wasn’t going to be able to get around how they got out of there with all that blood on them otherwise. Steve sighed. He really wished they talked about it. Billy knew he was a terrible liar. “He’ll be fine, he—he kept me alive and it’s really awesome. It just—he gets hurt and then it’s gone. Like in seconds.” This was his version of talking Billy up, and he knew the kids would find it cool. After all, they were the ones who found El.

“Just don’t like...talk to him about it. He still has thoughts about it. But that’s why El said that.” That and Billy was in the lab, being tortured by El’s papa. But Dustin didn’t need that one. “So, you gotta be fucking cool Henderson, or I’m not telling you shit ever again.” Steve warned him sternly, but he was sure Dustin would be fine. The kid could be pretty amazing when he fucking wanted.

Dustin hesitated and thought about Will. Maybe Billy was like him in

a sense, then. Will would sometimes go off in his own mind, retreat, and they'd have to bring him back. Was Billy like that, too? He frowned and then reached out to pat Steve's arm.

"I'm not going to tell anyone. Besides, Billy may not kill you, but he'd definitely kill me. Probably." Dustin grinned. He knew it wasn't true, though. Somewhere in the D&D games, Billy had looked less like he wanted to kick them over and more like Steve did in the beginning--a person who was forced to hang around kids, but didn't want to admit that it was *okay* and not *terrible*. Heck, he had even stopped calling them awful names for the most part.

"Do you think he'd show us? How he heals? That'd be *so cool* to watch." Dustin grinned and then pushed himself up and off the bed. "I mean. Not right now, obviously. But eventually?"

"Maybe eventually..." Steve frowned. It was something Billy was sensitive about, but sometimes the guy liked to be a showboat. It was hard to say when Billy got more comfortable with it. Though, he couldn't imagine Billy willfully hurting himself in order to do so, and the rest of his powers--that was something Billy was going to keep under very tight wraps, especially from Max. The last thing Billy would want was his sister thinking he was going to hurt her again, not after everything they'd been through.

"So just make sure to cut him some slack. He's been dealing with a lot." Not that the blonde was ever as comfortable with the kids as him, but Billy wouldn't do well if he was bombarded with questions. "Okay? You better swear on it, Henderson." Dustin took that shit really seriously, so Steve knew he was pulling out all the stops.

Dustin put his hands on his hips and looked at Steve. "I'm pretty good at that, you know. It's not like we bombard Will with questions and stuff. I'll be fine." He shrugged and grinned. "Stop being a worrywart. Seriously, Steve. Calm down. It's almost like you're worried about your *boyfriend* or something."

Before Steve could respond, Dustin darted out of the room and into the living room. He plopped down between Mike and Lucas and winked at Max. She rolled her eyes at him but smiled, and he immediately joined in on the conversation there.

Steve yelled after him and flushed a little. Billy and he hadn't used that term, not yet anyway, but it rang true. Hell, it rang more than true really. What was Billy to him? Just a boyfriend? Even boyfriend felt a little hollow compared to what they went through together, what they felt for each other. Steve hoped Billy would agree with that, but it wasn't a conversation he wanted to have. Steve felt fairly secure that Billy just wanted him, despite the fact that the guy could have left Steve at any given point.

He dimly realized Dustin either forgot or purposely didn't ask Steve any questions about his own abilities. Maybe that was for the best. Dustin may have been in awe of Billy's powers, but he would have flipped out when he learned about Steve's.

Steve collected himself and headed back into the space with the others. Billy stood by the tree, clearly uncomfortable. Neither one of them had a strong concept of family, but this was the closest that Steve ever had and he wanted to share it with Billy. He strode over to the blonde and gently bumped his hip against the other. A blink and you would have missed it. Steve smiled and whispered to him, "Dustin wanted to know if we found any mistletoe." It was odd, the kids knowing about them, but Steve hated keeping secrets, especially from people he cared about.

Billy tilted his head as Steve whispered to him and he smirked. "Does he, now?" He glanced over to Steve and then chuckled. What a brat. He looked back at the Christmas tree. The ornaments were cute, he guessed. There were a lot of ones that the boys had apparently made in school--some from Will and others from when Jonathan was a kid. He found it a little strange, but guessed it was an actual 'family' thing. Billy had always opted out of those activities after his mom died.

"I was thinkin' about taking a smoke break," Billy pitched a shoulder and then turned. He walked past Steve and made sure to brush their shoulders as he walked by. It was cold, sure, but smoking was important enough to him that it didn't matter. He grabbed his jacket, tossed it on, and made his way outside.

Billy wouldn't admit that being around that many people was exhausting for him, but fuck, it was. The whole 'I'm a perfectly

normal fucking human being' facade was grating. He tugged a cigarette out of his pack and pulled out his lighter.

But all of this was incredibly important to Steve and Billy knew that. No matter what, Steve really cared about these people and it was strange and disconcerting to have them draw around Billy as well, without mockery or cruelty. Family wasn't something Billy was used to. Even from outside, there was the loud sound of Dustin and Steve, arguing with each other and some laughter.

They were trying to include Billy, likely for Steve, but include him nevertheless. Two months ago, Billy would have been at a party or two every weekend, but parties themselves were isolated and lonely, even when there were ton of people there. None of them knew Billy, not really. Drinking beer was impressive, dancing with a girl or two. It didn't take much effort, but this did.

The window was slightly open, just in case something burned a little so that the entire house didn't reek with company. Joyce watched the young man outside, his shoulders taut as a he smoked. Hop told her about both of the boys, what they could do. It wasn't her place to announce it to the group, but she wondered how both of them were coping. Steve was a social creature and it was more difficult to get a read on him when he played with the children, but Billy seemed withdrawn and quiet, even more so than the few times she met him in passing.

Joyce watched him for several moments, peeled potatoes, before her hand slipped, and she sliced open her thumb. She cried out in pain, cursed and jerked her head down and stuck her hand under some cold water.

Billy had been in the middle of breathing in the nicotine when he heard Joyce yelp. He flinched and coughed on the cigarette. He waved the smoke away and furrowed his brows. His energy immediately spiked and that warmth began to crawl across his skin, floating, and he knew why. He rubbed his palm over his face and scowled to himself. He cared about these people, but he tried to reason that he only cared because *Steve* cared. That made sense, right?

Once Billy threw the cigarette to the ground, he stomped it out, he eased himself back into the house and glanced into the kitchen. He was quiet, purposefully trying to avoid attention as he walked over to Joyce. She was holding a paper towel around her hand and seemed to be disregarding Hopper's concern.

"Hey," Billy was hesitant, his voice low and strained. "I can... Just, let me see?" He offered his hand out to her, but kept his eyes on the floor. He didn't know that Hopper told Joyce about his powers, but what he did know is that Joyce didn't know him. It was okay if his help was rejected. He'd get it. He wasn't the most trustworthy person.

"Oh..." But Joyce simply extended her arm out to Billy and laid her hand on top of his. Hopper was silent, as he hadn't exactly seen any of this in action himself. Joyce stared at Billy with far too familiar large brown eyes when she removed the paper towel. It was deep enough so that it needed stitches, not many, just two or three, but it smarted like hell.

Most people were very careful around Billy, if they knew what was good for them. But Billy was her son's age and she had seen enough young men like Billy over her life. Even Hop, though he would be loathe to admit it, reminded Joyce of Billy. A lot of anger but a good heart, deep down, and Billy just needed a chance to let that shine through. Billy didn't meet her gaze and he looked much younger than he actually even was, unsure of himself. It made her think of her own boys and she couldn't help the warm flutter of her heart.

Billy wasn't exactly sure if he needed to touch in order to heal, but it felt right to slide his fingers over her hand. He glanced up at her hand, still not meeting her eyes, and blocked out all of the noise in the house. His own eyes seemed to glaze over as his mind escaped. His energy dove into hers and wrapped along the damage. The warmth spread throughout her hand as he did, and he watched as the wound began to seal itself.

By the time the wound was completely sealed, a small bit of blood had trickled down from his nose. He seemed to snap back into himself after the last of the warmth and pain disappeared from her wound. He stepped back and almost yanked his hand away, although it was nearly *hesitant* from his end. It was weird touching anyone but

Steve.

Joyce reminded him of his mom--all caring and sweet--so letting go had been a bit harder than he had anticipated. He reached up and swiped his hand across the blood beneath his nose. Really, Billy should probably find a bathroom to make sure he hadn't smeared it across his face.

Still, Billy's eyes didn't meet Joyce's or Hopper's. He stood, nervous, and couldn't seem to move his feet.

Joyce slowly flexed her finger, clearly impressed, and shockingly, even Hopper looked a cross between stoic and impressed as he stood behind her. Joyce let out a small laugh of delight and washed her finger under the water, cleaning off the blood and looked at it again--good as new. "That's so amazing...!"

She lowered her hand, smiled widely at him and gave a small huff of maternal pleasure akin to receiving a nice gift. "Thank you, Billy, really, that's just...well, I mean there's no other word other than amazing, right?" Joyce leaned up and wrapped her arms around his neck in a gentle hug without out warning. She was shorter than the boy and her healed hand rested on Billy's back, patted it gently, before she pulled back, still smiling. "You're a really special kid." It was said with no malice and pure honesty, and it wasn't something Billy was used to hearing unless, at a minimum, somebody wanted something out of him. Hopper eyed Billy behind her, but even he also moved his head in slight, appraising nod of agreement before he rested a hand on Joyce's shoulder.

Joyce's laughter made Billy's heart hit his chest harder. It made something inside of him swell--something he hadn't fucking felt in a long damned time. Maybe pride? Actual, honest pride? He wasn't sure. He wasn't able to determine what it was, though, because his mind completely bounced as Joyce hugged him. He stood still, his eyes popped wide and his lips parted. His gaze flickered to Hopper, clearly uncertain as to what to do, and then it dropped as Joyce pulled back.

"It... it's nothing," Billy mumbled. He finally looked up at Joyce and he felt as if he had been sucker-punched in the gut with the way she

looked at him. He stared at her and screamed at himself to move, to walk, to get away from this because it was foreign and he *couldn't*. He stepped back and clearly ignored her comment about him being 'special'. It brought his mind back to the lab and the idea made his stomach coil.

"Gonna... gonna smoke," Billy shouldn't have had to tell them. He didn't need to, but he felt it was necessary. He glanced between them before turning and walking out of the house again. But when he was outside, he didn't smoke, he just inhaled choppy breaths and sank down onto the porch stairs. He didn't deserve someone like Joyce.

Just a few minutes outside, Billy told himself. Just a few minutes to collect himself and then he'd go back in and mingle again.

It was hard to tell just how long Billy was outside before the door slid open and then Steve was at his side, bounced slightly in the cold as he arched an eyebrow at Billy. "You've been out here awhile, babe, food will be ready soon." Steve didn't call him that unless he was worried or they were in the bedroom, so it wasn't hard to decipher what emotion Steve felt at the moment. "The kids will do presents afterwards, I think Joyce baked like four pies." Steve prattled on before he gently reached for Billy's hand and interlocked their fingers.

Steve knew somebody could probably see them if they went looking, and that might make Billy uncomfortable, so he stepped close to him, their shoulders touching and hands obscured by their own bodies. "Talk to me....?"

Billy didn't seem to hear Steve until their hands touched. He jerked and looked over. Shit. He rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Yeah, yeah. I'm good. We're good." He squeezed Steve's hand and looked back over the snow. "I was just smoking." Of course, the smell of his last cigarette had long since left. It only smelled like crisp winter and food from the open window in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," Billy muttered after a while of just sitting there. "I'm not used to this. It's... hard, I guess. There's just a lot of people. That's all." He wasn't sure if he wanted to mention what had happened earlier with Joyce. He still wasn't sure how *he* felt about it. "I think

your opinion of Michael Jackson is wrong, though.” Deflecting. It’s what he did best.

Steve squeezed his hand and smiled, it’s not like it surprised him at all to hear Billy say that. He watched Billy grow quiet enough times when it was just the Party, let alone a full house of people. “It’s okay. You’re taking a break. What’s the big deal?” He leaned a little bit against Billy and allowed tiny waves of electricity to seep through his fingers. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure how it made Billy feel. Steve thought it would be painful, but it was in such small amounts that all Billy would say was that it felt nice. Steve suspected it had something to do with how Billy took in and gave energy himself, but it’s not like either one of them could know that with 100% certainty.

“Mmm, I think you should probably have a different opinion if you want a blowjob any time in the near future.” Steve didn’t mind distracting Billy, really. Maybe it seemed inauthentic to people, but Steve knew it helped Billy get through whatever crisis he faced at the moment. What could be more real than that?

“They’re important to you. That’s the big deal,” Billy flexed the fingers of his free hand and then decided, fuck it, and leaned against Steve’s shoulder. He looked out across the driveway. There were several cars parked around and a small dusting of snow was gathering over them. His eyes fell on Joyce’s car and he pressed his lips together. She had looked at him like he was her own kid for a moment, which is why he hightailed it the fuck out of there. That wasn’t something he was used to. Hell, it was hard for him to believe that he deserved it.

“And that isn’t nice, Harrington,” Billy chided, although he was obviously amused by it. He had to admit that, while he enjoyed what they had done and were still managing, it was frustrating that they hadn’t actually fucked yet. The mess in their lives just kept preventing it. “You know how you believe in fate and shit?” Billy looked at him and grinned. “What if fate is keeping us from fucking, huh? You ever thought of that? And there you were, believing that fate’s real. And I’m stuck not knowing what it’s like to properly fuck you. Or be fucked.” Billy shrugged and glanced at the Beemer.

Steve made a soft, strangled noise in the back of his throat and

tightened his fingers over Billy's. Heat pooled in his stomach instantly and goddamnit, Billy knew what he was doing and he was sure the bastard could even sense it or see it or whatever he did. This wasn't something they ever discussed, even if Billy enjoyed pushing Steve until he was begging for it in the heat of the moment, and Steve would go as far as Billy took him--it just wasn't the heat of the moment right then. So Steve couldn't stop the way his cheeks turned bright red, all the way to the tips of his ears, and he knew he couldn't blame it on the cold.

If he had been more rational, less flabbergasted, and maybe not as turned on by the idea, Steve might say that it was fine and they didn't need to rush anything. He had never been with a guy before, and no matter what they had, it was bit of a first for Billy as well. But at the moment he was being assaulted with mental images of Billy holding him down, riding Billy instead of his fingers, and kissing the blonde until he came apart in his hands, so Steve ducked his head down and croaked out, "Well, maybe fate is just--going to make it really fucking perfect or something, Hargrove, I don't control the goddamn stars!" Steve knew he sounded flustered and uncool, but it was just another moment that Billy shocked the hell out of him and seemed way more suave than Steve himself. He didn't pout per se, but his throat felt dry and Steve had to will away any impending hard-ons.

Billy burst out laughing, the noise sharp and loud. He shook his head and took in the way Steve's face turned red. Not getting laid would be worth seeing that. Since returning from the lab, they had touched and explored, but it was cautious and hesitant. Billy sometimes *couldn't* and would curl away, mumbling apologies. Sometimes Steve's electricity would shock him a little too much and Steve would feel like shit (while Billy healed himself and just smiled at him). They were a great duo, the two of them.

"Poor thing," Billy cooed, but he knew it was all mocking. He grinned and chanced pressing a kiss to Steve's temple. "Can't handle a little honesty?" He scooted closer, *impossibly close*, and brushed his lips over Steve's ear. "I can't imagine how tight you are, pretty boy. And with that electricity of yours? Fucking you would be phenomenal." He kissed the skin just below Steve's ear and pushed himself up from

the step. "You said food was about ready, right?"

The back and forth was a great distraction for Billy--a semblance of some sort of *normal* that normal teenagers had. He reached down and ruffled Steve's hair before making his way inside. Oh, he knew he'd be in for it later, but watching Steve react like that? Worth it.

Steve groaned loudly behind Billy, half bordering on a scream as he clenched his fists and did his best not to tear through his hair. The bastard enjoyed it, he *knew*, he knew it and Steve fell for it *every time*. He huffed and did his best to collect himself as he went inside. As soon as Steve stepped in, the lights flickered once and everybody stopped for just a moment.

Naturally their reasons were entirely different, but Steve's eyes widened for a moment and he flushed even darker before he cursed under his breath. When the lights held, everybody let out a sigh of relief aside from Billy, Hopper, and El. No, Billy had the fucking audacity to look amused whereas Hopper was cautious as usual. Steve was grateful to see the old Billy again, but that asshole knew what he was doing.

It was El, though, who piped up, "It's okay, it was just Steve."

Billy's grin was still on his face as Steve flickered the lights. He shot a glance at him and then stumbled as El spoke up. Oh, shit. He blinked and looked back at Steve. Shit. Shitshitshit. He looked around the room and worked his jaw. This could be fixed, right? Steve hated what he could do, but in reality, the lights flickering because of Steve was better than the Upside Down, right?

What if Steve's angry at him for this? Sure, he was being huffy about being teased, but he hadn't planned on this. He ignored the shocked look Dustin sent Steve and sidled up to him.

"Hey," Billy murmured. He slid his hand to Steve's side. Fuck it. If people knew, they knew. It would be better than Steve possibly having a panic attack. "There isn't a mistletoe, but can I kiss you?" He murmured, sliding his nose just beside Steve's ear.

"Steve did--" Dustin stopped himself, though, and his eyebrows shot

into his hairline as Billy slid up to Steve like god damned Casanova. "Oookay then."

"Gross," Max huffed and turned around, although there was a smile on her face as she looked at her friends.

Steve was already flushed from what happened outside, but when Billy came over to him, *touched* him and he felt Billy's breath over his ear, his lips right there, and the kids and everybody watching them--Steve's eyes were impossibly wide and he could feel the heat spread over his face and down his neck. It didn't matter that basically everybody there already knew about about them, when Billy's fingers curled around his waist, Steve turned his head in a started gasp and he started to say, "No, *don't*- -"

And then Billy's lips were on his. It was downright chaste really, but it was so tender like when they were alone, even though Billy was doing this in public, and it was so much that Steve felt rush of electricity shoot out within him. All of the house lights hummed loudly overhead and the ones in the living room cracked under the intensity and broke all at once to a few startled cries.

Steve wasn't about to have a panic attack, but he was sure he had never been so embarrassed in his entire life. He grimaced a little and swallowed, "Uh...sorry, guys." Everybody's eyes were on him and he just felt mortified.

Steve felt Billy's hand still on his waist when El perked up, "That was Steve, again."

"Yeah, they know, El." Steve mumbled, his face still impossibly red.

Billy leaned away from Steve and he smiled at him. The humming of the lights--the breaking of the bulbs--none of it bothered him. He was used to Steve's inability to control it, and it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Well, Joyce would have to replace her bulbs, but at least Steve hadn't shocked anyone. He pressed another kiss to Steve's temple and pulled away from him. His fingers had curled into his shirt and his arm hung there.

An idea made Billy's smile widen and he leaned in again so he was

close to Steve. He didn't want everyone to hear, but he also thought it was the perfect timing. "Light of my life, Steve." He cooed at him before slipping away to grab them both drinks.

"Holy shit," Dustin breathed, his eyes uncharacteristically wide and his jaw dropped. "Holy shiiiiit! That was *awesome!* Steve! Steve, do it again!"

Billy laughed before he could catch himself, and his own blush tinted his cheeks. Oh. They had just opened a can of worms and the kids were going to be all over Steve. Billy would make sure to hide in the background.

Steve wanted to be angry at Billy, but he mostly just felt embarrassed by how Billy made him feel having such a tangible and physical reaction on him in front of everyone. Steve put up his hands in a placating gesture when the kids, especially Dustin, pressed in and crowded around him. Jonathan and Nancy were quickly whispering to each other on the couch and Steve made a stressed cry as he was practically backed into the wall.

He could still feel Billy's breath against his ear and his words hung in the air. "I can't just snap my fingers, I'm still figuring it out!" But the kids were relentless and so he groaned and focused for a moment, a little white spark danced between his spread fingers for a moment, just like the inside of one of those plasma globes he knew the kids had. Of course then Nancy and Jonathan were up and coming over and Steve let out a nervous laugh.

As soon as Billy was in the kitchen though, there was Joyce, struggling to arrange everything in some holiday cookware set and she grabbed Billy. "Put the mashed potatoes in that one and the creamed corn over there, sweetie."

Billy almost flinched as Joyce grabbed him. Okay, he *did* flinch, but he recovered quick enough to nod. He slid away from her and started to help, although his eyes flickered over to Steve at random to make sure he was okay while the kids, Nancy and Jonathan asked questions and oh'ed and awe'ed over the electricity he managed to spark up.

Once he was finished doing as Joyce instructed, he turned to her and

hesitated. "Anything else?" He asked. "I mean. I can do stuff. I didn't..." He didn't mean for it to sound awful, but it did, especially coming from Billy. He pressed his lips together and waited for her instructions. He didn't mind helping--that wasn't the problem--he was just bad at communication.

She smiled warmly, though. "Just help me set up the table, Hop insisted that he was going to carve the turkey, but I think I'm going to have you in on standby." She threw a little wink his way as they began moving the dishes out to the table, which was far too small to accomodate all of them. Joyce certainly didn't look like his mother, it was just that maternal warmth that was off-putting. Susan wasn't unkind to him, necessarily, but even absently ignoring Neil's cruelty, she wasn't like Joyce.

Some people were going to have to eat in the living room, but the whole thing was still so...homey and wonderful, and so unlike any holidays Billy actually experienced. Once everything was set up, she gently slid her arm under Billy's. Joyce knew she was crowding Billy, but some small part of her sensed he needed it, despite the tenseness of his body. "Thank you, Billy, for helping and my finger." She cupped his cheek once before she released him, the kids yelled louder from the living room, with the occasional comment from Nancy or Jonathan rising over their exuberant voices.

Billy's eyes went comically wide again as Joyce's arm slid beneath his and her hand cupped his cheek. He watched her and couldn't even come up with something to say-- *absolutely nothing* --before she pulled away and wandered off. He watched her quietly for a few moments and then looked at the floor. It was hard to accept affection like that, but maybe he would eventually not flinch whenever someone touched him. Well, anyone other than Steve. It was only when Steve caught him off guard that he flinched, and thankfully, Steve never mentioned it.

"Try to shock me!" Dustin demanded, and that's when Billy's head snapped up and his brows furrowed. Man, for a kid who was supposedly smart, he was acting pretty fucking stupid. He walked over to the group of kids and settled his hand on Dustin's head. The kid tilted his head up and then froze when he realized who was touching him.

"I'm the only one who he gets to shock, kiddo," Billy muttered. "I can always put your hand in a light socket, though."

"STEVE!" Dustin dropped out from underneath Billy's hand and scrambled over to Steve.

"Like you haven't done it before," Max snorted and Dustin glared at her.

"Look, it was only *once* --"

"You *have* ?!" Max burst into a fit of laughter and Billy smirked. His eyes flickered from his sister to Max and his smirk melted into a smile.

Steve looked incredibly relieved as he leaned heavily against the wall. His nightmares lessened since Billy's return, but Billy was aware that his powers were a new element to them. The idea of actually hurting one of the kids, even playfully, was not something Steve could ever do. Steve sighed and glanced over at Billy, afforded him with a small smile. He shoved Dustin away a little to play with the kids again as Nancy and Jonathan wandered off, aware the mood was over.

"Thanks," Steve whispered, pressed his hands against the wall. The idea of losing control was a real fear for Steve, and it didn't always help when he couldn't stop lights blinking or flashing around him, especially in tuned with his emotions. He reached out and gently hooked one finger in Billy's jeans pocket, pulled him silently closer. "I didn't mean for you to...have to do that in front of everybody. I wasn't going to lose it."

Billy paused as Steve thanked him and then grinned as Steve tugged him over by his pocket. A warm thrill shot through his body and he tried to shrug it off. Steve had looked uncomfortable, and Billy was good at making a mess, even if it meant that the mess would make a couple kids freak out. At least it dragged the attention away from Steve. He shifted closer to Steve and glanced over his face.

"Have you seen a mistletoe around, Steve?" Billy murmured, "I'm just as curious as Dustin, I guess." He laughed softly and leaned into

Steve's side. "But... really, Steve. I wanted to. I... I know we can't be--be like normal couples in public. So... in front of people who you care about? I figure it might be. I don't know. Important for you to feel... important in front of them. With me." He was mumbling, and as he mumbled, he continued to get redder. He was so damned confident in his actions normally (well, before the lab). His talking skills sucked, though, and he looked at the ceiling to avoid Steve's eyes.

Steve smiled widely as he took in Billy's face. He knew it was all new for him, difficult, so Steve really appreciated the effort that he made. Steve kept his finger hooked in his jeans as he tugged Billy away and down the hall. He stood in front of the room they were going to stay in, the door slightly ajar, and Steve used his other hand to point to the ceiling. Steve noticed it earlier when he spoke to Dustin in here, but to hear the blonde make such a cheesy request made his heart pound.

Steve slid his arms Billy's neck and grinned at him. "Maybe one day things will be different, or we'll be in a different place, but for now, as long as I have you, William Hargrove," and Steve couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled out of him, "I have everything I need." Some part of Steve missed that cocky Billy, missed the way that Billy made him throb in excitement and anticipation, but he was still in there. And now there was another Billy, too, unsure of himself just like Steve, but kinder than Billy gave himself credit for. Steve smiled wider and pressed their foreheads together.

Once Steve guided Billy by his *fucking pocket* to the mistletoe under their door, Billy felt another wave of warmth move through his body. The fact that the mistletoe was *there* didn't escape him, and he had a suspicion that Joyce put it there. He was beginning to like her more and more, even if her affection was unfamiliar. He tilted his head to look at the ridiculous decoration and then froze. When he tilted his head back down to look at Steve, his eyes were wide. Damn. How many times was he going to be surprised that night?

"Careful, sweetheart," Billy murmured. He rarely used that endearment. It slipped whenever he was too full of emotions or Steve was on the brink of a particularly bad panic attack. "Using my given name like that. You'll make me think you want something more than

a kiss.” He smiled and reached up to cup Steve’s cheek. He eased Steve’s head down so he could press their lips together. It was gentle at first, but it quickly moved to almost desperate. Billy opened his mouth and slid his tongue over Steve’s lower lip before biting him lightly.

Dustin had been on his way to get Steve for something, but Max grabbed the back of his shirt and yanked him back into the group.

“What was that for?” Dustin stared at her and then huffed.

“Just stay here,” Max glanced toward the opening of the hall and settled down again. “They need some privacy from you, idiot.”

“That’s not nice,” Dustin muttered, but he knew why Max had suddenly become more protective of Billy. There was a general understanding in the Party, thanks to Max, El and Will, that sometimes, the two just needed to be left alone to breathe or collect themselves. They all got that after Will’s experience, and although it was almost time to eat, they all settled and continued to play their game.

Steve’s hands slowly moved around to the small of Billy’s back with one traveling up to bring him in closer. Steve parted his lips with a soft moan as Billy’s tongue slid inside and *took* Steve’s mouth like he owned it. He couldn’t stop the excited whimper that left him as he slowly sucked Billy’s tongue. Steve arched his pelvis against the blonde, rolled his hips slowly. He learned against the doorway for support when he started to feel a little dizzy, torn between melting into the kiss and refused to come up for air.

There was a soft clearing of a throat that did it and he broke the kiss, panting quietly, to see Nancy. She stood there with a sort of amused expression on her face and her eyebrows raised up. It wasn’t too long ago that that was her, being kissed by Steve Harrington. But she supposed that was the difference, *being* kissed and actually kissing.

She smiled, “Dinner is ready.” Nancy turned on her heel and paused for a moment, threw a look over her shoulder to Billy. “You have to be careful you know, he’ll do that all damn day if you let him.” She smiled and strode back to the rest of the group, secure with her own

decision.

Billy had settled his hand on the doorframe above Steve's head, leaning into it so he could chase the kiss. He almost didn't stop, even when Nancy cleared her throat. Of course, Steve pulled back first, and Billy smirked. He looked over his face--cheeks flushed and eyes glazed--and then glanced over his shoulder to Nancy. She was probably right, too. Billy wouldn't complain, though. The idea of kissing Steve like this for any amount of time made his blood simmer.

When Billy looked back at Steve, he contemplated just throwing him into the Beemer and leaving. He was done waiting. He was done thinking about what it would be like to see Steve completely unraveled. He *needed* to see it. He leaned up and pressed his lips over Steve's again, but kept it chaste. As he pulled back, he slid his free hand over Steve's stomach so that he could grab and tug at the hem of his jeans.

"After dinner, we're going for a drive," Billy murmured. "And I'm going to wreck you, Steve Harrington." He stepped away and looked Steve up and down *slowly* so that it was damned obvious what he was doing. He licked his lips, winked at Steve, and turned to walk back into the kitchen.

"Do you need any help, Joyce?" Billy left behind whatever heat he had been carrying in front of Steve and stood to the side. His offer of help didn't go unnoticed by the kids, who stared at him like he had grown a second head.

28. Chapter 28

Summary for the Chapter:

Finally, it's the smut you've all been waiting for!
Once again dedicating the smut to Janna, my own
personal Hopper, who puts up with a lot of my shit.

Steve's eyes were wide as he heard those words, his heart pounded in his chest, and he had to take a moment to compose himself before he followed behind Billy. He knew that Billy meant it, and his cheeks were flushed as he forced himself not to get a fucking hard on for the second time that day. He was already embarrassed that Nancy, of all people, saw them. She had never been a judgmental person, not like that anyway, but her gentle teasing was still a bit of a shock to his system.

The last comment didn't really surprise him. He pursued Nancy relentlessly, and even when they were actually together, all he wanted to do was touch her. Steve was never good at taking things slow or damming up his emotions. Of course, the difference between Nancy and Billy was that he didn't chase Billy. They were two forces that met each other, clashed, built up against one another until they both exploded and then they waited for the next time it would happen. And dammit if that didn't really, *really* excite Steve.

Steve left the hallway in a bit of a daze as Joyce and *Billy* finished setting up the entire table. He sat down next to the blonde as Hopper grumbled and gently shoved Joyce into a chair before he began to carve the turkey. The kids were all shouting what they wanted, light or dark meat, and some snuck a roll or a taste as Hopper barked at them to knock it off. It worked for seconds before they were all back to talking loudly. Steve didn't look over at Billy when he reached over and gently took his hand, his thumb slowly moving back and forth across the back of Billy's hand.

He didn't know where he would be if it weren't for Billy. He couldn't imagine that he'd be dating anybody else. One of the reasons why he thought Nancy was so interesting was because everybody else was so boring. Billy Hargrove was anything but boring.

Dustin laughed loudly and Steve glanced over at him, recalled his conversation with the brat that day on the tracks. Sexual electricity. It was a joke now, but it was still true. Even before everything that happened in that lab and the tunnels, Steve burned brighter with Billy around, and he knew Billy felt the same way. The blonde opened himself up for Steve, shared himself in a way that Billy didn't have to tell Steve he'd never done before. Steve knew that, in his own way, Steve was Billy's first, too. He squeezed Billy's hand softly and released their hold only when the food was passed around. Holidays. An apartment. Jobs. Together. Steve smiled widely and laughed a little louder than usual as they ate. His gift for Billy burned a little in his pocket, and he hoped Billy liked it.

Billy sat a little closer to Steve than necessary, but no one said anything about it. Max smiled at him, her eyes shining and her cheeks flushed. He gave her a 'don't you dare' look as the food was passed around. She just stuck her tongue out and then turned to wrap herself up in a conversation with Lucas. Billy looked away as she did and put small bits on his own plate. He remembered when he used to eat a ridiculous amount, but after the lab, he was slowly working up the ability to hold that much. Hell, maybe he never would.

Steve's laughter is what kept catching Billy's attention. Whenever he heard it, his eyes flickered and his lips twitched. He would take a bite of his food to stop himself from smiling. This was the first time they had felt okay since everything. Hell, it wasn't even that far out from when they had stumbled back from the tunnels. Yet, here they were, eating among a strange, ridiculous, and amazing group of people.

A year ago, Billy would have laughed at the idea. Now? He didn't like the idea of being alone, even *if* the group of middle schoolers were sometimes much more than he was willing to handle. Steve had a fucking heart of gold for being able to deal with all of them. Although, it was sort of amazing what food did to kids. One second, they're yelling and flailing, and the next, their mouths are preoccupied with food and the only real noise was the adults chatting.

Billy glanced around at the group of kids again and thought about what they meant to him. If any of those vans showed up, if any of those people tried to touch them, he'd end up exploding. He

supposed that meant he cared, but he would never tell them that. He glanced away and blanched when he caught Jonathan looking at him. The kid had a small smile on his face--a *knowing* smile--and Billy glared at him for a second before looking away. It wasn't meant to be much, and Jonathan knew that, considering his smile only got bigger before Nancy said something that distracted him.

Joyce had somehow known to put Billy in between her and Steve. It had helped with Billy's anxiety, and that was sort of strange for him. No one really did anything for him (except for Steve--and that had been recent). She kept doing things that made him feel like more than just a lost teenager. Or disowned. Whichever it happened to be. He looked at her and then fiddled with his fork.

"Thank you, Joyce. For this," Billy murmured. With the voices going on at the table, it was considerably soft, but loud enough that she would be able to hear him. "I mean. The food is really good." Of course, that wasn't exactly what he was talking about, but Joyce would probably understand.

"Of course, sweetie. We're happy you're here." Joyce reached out and gently squeezed his arm, her eyes lit up from her smile before she spoke to Hopper. The last thing she wanted was to scare Billy away and she was aware that sometimes love had to come in small doses to be accepted.

It wasn't long before the kids had shoved enough food into their mouths to be ready for presents. There weren't that many, but the ones there were basically just for the kids. Hopper wore a very serious expression when he watched El open her gifts, studied each of her expressions to make sure that she liked them, even if she didn't always understand what they were for.

Steve sat beside Billy on the couch, sandwiched between him and Jonathan with their legs touching. Nancy sat on the arm of the couch with her arm draped over Jonathan, watching the kids with a smile on her face. When Steve handed Dustin the my little pony, he had a horrified expression on his face of whether or not he was supposed to actually be grateful. Steve roared with laughter until tears came to his eyes. He knocked into both Billy and Jonathan when he dissolved into fits of laughter as Dustin's expression grew darker by the second.

Steve collected himself and placed a hand on Billy's knee to sit forward before he pointed to a large box in the corner. It was the ColecoVision gaming system and Dustin let out an excited yell. The kids crowded around him and Steve grinned as he shouted that it was for everybody to *share* . Even still, Steve was sure it would remain at Dustin's house.

Steve grinned as he leaned back on the couch, the back of his head pressed into Billy's arm that the blonde seemingly slipped behind him. Jonathan and Nancy excitedly chattered as he looked over at Billy. He was still smiling but suddenly it looked a little nervous when Steve quietly said, "I got you something, it's a little small and not-not a big deal." Steve wanted to get Billy something large, maybe tickets to a show or something, but there was simply no time with everything that happened. He chewed his lower lip and handed Billy a small, felt drawstring jewelry bag. He felt his cheeks color and he muttered, "It's not like a ring or anything, so don't, you know."

Billy had been watching the commotion with mild amusement. He was a little upset that he hadn't taken Max to get her board, and although she didn't have one that wasn't broken yet , he had told her he was still planning on taking her to the city to find another one. Whatever happened didn't matter. He continued to push that he was a man of his word, and that they would go after the Holidays were over. Max seemed fine with that, even if Billy felt like shit over it (but Max was adamant that it was okay).

Steve pulled him out of his thoughts with the small jewelry bag. He blinked at him, obviously surprised, and slid his fingers over it. At that moment, he didn't really have an appropriate response. He hadn't even opened it and he was speechless. His eyes trailed from the small pouch to Steve and he tried to fight back his smile.

"What did you do now, Steve?" Billy teased as he loosened the string and gently rolled the piece of jewelry into the palm of his hand.

It was a simple, silver chain. There was nothing special to it really, but Steve fidgeted a little next to him, his voice low. "I just...it's just titanium. It's supposed to be the strongest metal for-for chains and I know your pendant means a lot to you and I didn't want you to ever lose it." Steve didn't really think of it as anything except a practical

gift, which is why he felt strange having it be the only thing he could give Billy. But when he thought of the idea weeks ago, he recalled the fondness that Billy used to touch it and the anxiety it caused him when he lost it at the house the first time they went back after Neil beat Billy.

This was just something that wasn't going to easily break, and since Billy always wore it, Steve thought maybe he would feel a little reassured wearing something other than just some cheap chain. Steve chewed his lower lip, "Next year, I can..." He swallowed, he didn't want to make some sort of pressured plan and get ahead of himself. Steve sighed softly.

Billy stared at the chain for a few moments, his lips parted. He was going to say something, he really was, but nothing actually came out. He slid his fingers over the chain and felt his heart race against his chest. He looked from the chain to Steve and felt his cheeks warm. Instead of saying anything, Billy leaned and pressed a kiss to Steve's cheek. He closed his eyes as he did and then pulled away.

Carefully, Billy eased his necklace up and over his head. He ran his thumbs over the pendant and then began the process of transferring the piece from the old chain to the new one. He was particularly careful with the necklace, handling it with a gentleness that just didn't seem like *Billy*. Yet, it was the last thing he owned that his mother had given him. Until Steve, she had been the only person who actually *loved* him.

Once the pendant was on the new chain, Billy slid it up and over his head. He fiddled with the piece again and reached over to squeeze Steve's knee. The old chain was secured into the jewelry bag and Billy fidgeted for a moment. He had something for Steve, but it wasn't... it wasn't *that* special.

"Wanna go for that ride now?" Billy murmured.

Steve silently accepted the kiss, aware that some people were looking at them again. It was really strange. Even when he was with Nancy, they didn't really hang out with the kids so much other than occasionally making out upstairs while the brats played their games in the basement. So now he was sort of hyper aware of being stared

at by people he cared about while he experienced Billy's affection. It wasn't a bad feeling. He just wondered what they made of it--of Billy and Steve being together.

Steve nodded, a slight flush rose to his cheeks when he announced they would be back later. There were groans and hugs by the kids that wouldn't be there when they got back. Max stayed with Billy for a long time, before he received a warm hug from El and even one from Dustin. Mike and Lucas chattered happily with Steve, who smiled and laughed along with their jokes before he was tapped on the shoulder.

He turned and Nancy embraced him tightly. It was strangely familiar, but new, as well, since their feelings for each other were so drastically different. Steve realized for the first time that Nancy had probably been worried about him--not just when Billy was gone, but after everything that happened to *him* . He placed a firmly affectionate kiss to her cheek and he smiled as he felt her shudder a little, stifled her tears. Steve knew both Billy and Jonathan were watching them, but he was sure neither one of them were particularly worried. "I'll see you later, Nance, yeah?"

Her lips quirked into a small smile, "You're an idiot, Steve." He waved her off as she sat beside Jonathan again. As they were about to leave, Hopper warned them not to be out too long. Hopper's warning specifically was that he planned to call Joyce later to make sure they were back and in bed, his tone firm and with an air that he didn't really care all that much, even though he squeezed Billy's shoulder as Steve slipped his jacket back on and he headed to the BMW.

Billy nodded as Hopper squeezed his shoulder, mumbling about how they wouldn't be out too late. After all, he wasn't interested in staying out all night like he used to. His only goal was to be with Steve. *Alone* . He followed Steve out to the Beamer after grabbing the hoodie he had been borrowing from him. His jacket, along with his favorite pair of boots, had been taken from him in the lab. It was only because he was spitting mad, raging, absolutely inconsolable, that they-- *Brenner* --had allowed him to keep his necklace on. It had helped ground him at times, even when he was naked and shivering and covered in blood.

It was probably a good thing Billy had it on when Steve had found him. Otherwise, he would have probably gone back for it. He reached up and slid his fingers over the chain Steve bought him as he made his way to the passenger door of the BMW. As he climbed in, he had to admit to himself that he missed his Camaro. Who the fuck knew where his car was at this point. If Neil's truck was at the bottom of the quarry, his car probably was, too.

"Steve..." Billy chewed on his lower lip, his fingers still messing with the chain. "I had... something for you. It was in the Camaro before..." He shrugged. "I mean, it wasn't much. I couldn't--it was--" he was stuttering and *fuck* he was not good at this. "It was a mixtape and I can make another one." The last bit was said in a rush and his cheeks burned.

Steve arched an eyebrow before he smiled widely and leaned over, took Billy's hand and squeezed it before he kissed him softly. Truthfully, it was surprising, but Steve also knew that Billy would take it so seriously--plan the whole thing out. Billy took music incredibly seriously before all this shit. When his parents had been home, and they acted more like friends than anything else, Billy talked about music frequently and passionately.

"Okay, I'd like that. Bet it had tons of Michael Jackson on it, right?" Steve's smile widened as he ignored the nervous butterflies in his stomach and he started the car. "You're going to have to tell me where we're going." Steve carefully pulled out of the driveway and turned onto the road. The Byers always lived on the outskirts of town and it gave them all a little air of mystery. Steve didn't really like the woods. He never had, especially after the Upside-Down, but with Billy there, he wasn't really concerned about anything or anybody bothering them.

Billy groaned and shook his head. "Unfortunately for you, *no* ." He made a face, although his skin was still flushed from the kiss. He looked out of the window and tapped his fingers on his thighs. "It really doesn't matter where. Just... somewhere private." Somewhere he could take Steve apart and put him back together. Somewhere they could be as loud or ridiculous as they wanted without fear of someone finding them. From Neil to Steve's parents to the lab--they were rarely alone and it had become almost *stifling* .

What Billy wouldn't admit, though, was that the last song on the mixed tape had been The Ghost In You by The Psychedelic Furs. He had been fucking terrified of admitting that he loved Steve. He had planned on revealing that through music because he sucked with words, but that plan had been thrown to the wayside-- *far* to the wayside.

And even though everything worked out, at least in the sense that Steve loved him as well, it was important to Billy to express himself musically. Even now, Steve said that he loved Billy on a more frequent basis that he returned it. Though, whenever he did, Steve melted into a wide smile and embarrassed laugh. Something tangible of his love would have been nice to give Steve.

Steve's cheeks were still flushed as he mindlessly drove then, but he refused to look over at Billy. He wanted to say that Billy shouldn't feel like he had to do something with Steve, but he suspected that wasn't the issue. If he had asked, Billy would have fucked him that first night after his nightmare. No, the issue was that since everything got delayed, Steve knew that no matter what his first time with Billy was like, it wasn't going to be the last, and it wasn't just going to be fucking.

Steve turned down a narrow service road. It wasn't too far away from the quarry or the lover's lane hideout in Hawkins. Steve didn't believe anybody would come close to it on Christmas Eve and so he parked and slowly turned the car off. He chewed his lower lip and glanced over at Billy.

As the engine shut off, Billy ran his palms over his jeans. He gazed at the dash of the car and wished he could just revert back to who he used to be. Suave. Easy going. Charming. He chewed on his cheek and finally glanced over to Steve. It seemed like they both needed tonight. Steve looked less stressed out. Less like the world was crumbling around him. He was incredibly social, and being around his friends had put some color back in his cheeks.

"I actually..." Billy trailed off and then smiled, although it was nervous. "I've been wanting to do this, so I thought that if we could... Get away, I mean." Obviously, Billy had thought about this. He had wanted Steve for so long now, and he hadn't wanted to chance not

being ready for it. "So, I brought lube." It was *so fucking ridiculous* that he laughed. He was also avoiding Steve's eyes. There was a small bottle of lube underneath the passenger seat-- *his seat* .

Fuck. If only Billy could just go back to not being so nervous or unsure of himself.

Steve's eyes widened a moment and he joined Billy's laughter. There was something weirdly touching about Billy actually preparing for the moment, so Steve steeled his nerves and took a deep breath when he unbuckled his belt. Steve felt nervous as hell but he was aware that if he started this, got worked up in the moment as he usually did, that would dissipate just like smoke for the both of them.

So Steve clumsily climbed over the console, his long legs knocking around in the car, against the steering wheel and the radio, as he pulled himself up and over Billy's lap. Strangely enough, Steve never had sex in his car before. His parents were gone often enough to use his bed or hook up with some girl at a party. He felt strange in Billy's lap and reached behind him to lower the seat back. With their combined weight, it fell back much faster than usual and Steve let out a nervous laugh, his body pressed against Billy's.

He swallowed, a smile on his face and he kept his tone as playful as possible as he looked into Billy's eyes. "Be gentle. It's my first time." Well, he was half right.

Billy apparently found Steve climbing through the car as amusing. He chuckled until Steve was on top of his lap, and the noise abruptly stopped. Fuck. He looked over Steve's body and then made the most undignified fucking noise when the seat fell back. He burst out laughing again and wrapped his arms around Steve's waist.

"Hell, Steve," Billy managed after he caught his breath. He tilted his head and looked up at Steve. "You're gorgeous, you know." The compliment was quiet as Billy looked over him--from his done hair (I can't go to the Christmas party without my hair done, *Billy*), to his ridiculously large eyes, to his pouty lips and the beauty marks on his face and neck. He reached up and brushed the backs of his fingers over Steve's cheeks.

"I'm not sure I know how to be gentle," Billy grinned, then, and took Steve's face into his hand. He tugged him down and pressed his lips over Steve's. Immediately, he pushed his tongue into his mouth and explored him. Steve tasted like apple pie and *Steve*. He shivered and felt his cock harden behind the hem of his jeans.

When Billy pulled him down, Steve was ready. He parted his lips for Billy and let out a quiet moan, just like when they had been in the hallway. It was slow at first, like how it usually was, before somebody groaned. Steve wasn't even sure who, and he made a soft, desperate noise against Billy's tongue. He felt Billy's cock under his ass and he took his time then, arched his hips and writhed against Billy. He wanted Billy to fucking *feel* him, feel how much Steve wanted it, too.

His voice was a little rough when Steve pulled back, panting softly, "I'm sorry, I know if I was quieter, we could have--already...but I promise I won't hold back, and I don't want you to either." Steve meant what he said about Billy making him loud, about not wanting to ever muffle that. He didn't know if Billy felt the same way about it as Steve did, but being quiet with Billy felt inauthentic, and even if it was just him moaning out in the most embarrassing way, Steve wanted Billy to know just how good the blonde made him feel. Steve licked his lips and rolled his hips harder in Billy's lap.

It was hard to deny Steve. Billy wasn't loud. He never really had been. The only time he could remember actually making any sort of real noise was when Steve's fingers were inside of him. He shivered as he remembered that and returned Steve's roll of his hips. He ground up against him and gasped. It felt nice not to worry about people listening in, and *fuck*, the idea of Steve being loud? That made his cock pulse.

"You need to get out of your pants," Billy muttered. He felt a small amount of fear spike through him. This didn't feel like any other time he had fucked someone. It didn't feel like... it was going to be *fucking*. Billy didn't want to think about it. He had a hard enough time telling Steve he loved him. To say that they--that they--?

Billy leaned up and caught Steve's mouth again. He bit his lower lip gently and then began to press a line of kisses from his mouth to his

jaw. Once he got to his neck, Billy opened his mouth and sucked over the skin. He knew it would mark and he was so *good* with that. He bit down on the mark and then found another spot to bite and suck.

Steve groaned and his hips stuttered in their roll for a moment as he arched his back and tilted his head up. Everybody would see, but he was sure that Billy liked that. His eyes fluttered closed for a moment and he bit down hard on his lower lip, "I'll--I'll get in the back--" He gasped in pleasure for a moment when Billy sucked especially hard.

Steve managed to pull himself up off Billy's lap and climb in between the two seats into the back. He sort of fell in the back, tripped over the center console, but that didn't stop him from yanking his sweater up over his head and working on his pants. He paused when he realized Billy was staring at him from the front. Steve left out a soft, breathless laugh and he knew he seemed eager as hell, because he was. He unzipped his jeans slowly and motioned to the spot beside him. "No way I'm gonna be the only naked one, Billy."

"Right," Billy felt like that was the dumbest, shittiest response ever, but *fuck* Steve was really attractive. Like, shouldn't be allowed out of the room attractive. And he was Billy's. He grinned at Steve and reached down to grab the small bottle of lube from underneath the seat. After tossing it onto Steve's stomach, Billy tugged the hoodie and his shirt off. His shoes and jeans came next, and once he was naked, he climbed over the console. At least he was more graceful than Steve. He was used to climbing around in cars.

Not bothering for Steve to adjust, Billy took one of his legs and propped it to the side. He eased in between his thighs on the seat, his knees digging into the fabric as he looked over Steve's body. Thank god the BMW was bigger than the Camaro. He smirked at that and leaned down to press his lips over Steve's.

"Hey, baby," Billy mumbled against his lips and it was obvious he was smiling because it was ruining the kiss, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Steve smiled back as he felt it, and laughed softly against Billy's lips as his hand touched Billy's abdominals. "Hey yourself, Hargrove...wanna see something cool?" Steve smirked then, pulled

Billy a little further down and onto the other seat. Steve was still wearing his pants, unbuttoned and unzipped as he leaned forward across the middle console and touched his radio. It took a few seconds before the music came to life in the speakers, the radio cracked as the stations quickly switched over before Steve stopped on Michael Jackson's "P.Y.T."

Steve fell back with a grin. He had been practicing that one, and was glad he got it on the first try or he would have looked like a real dipshit. Steve was even sure if he killed the battery, he could start it without the jumper cables. He knew Billy was watching him when he arched his hips up high and pulled down his pants and briefs, pushed them down into the footwell using his legs before he smiled widely at Billy and leaned against the door.

Billy's eyebrows shot up as the radio came on and then he groaned as Steve stopped at Michael Jackson. "Seriously, Harrington?" He groused, but he didn't make a move to change it, and he certainly stayed the fuck still as Steve shimmied out of his jeans and briefs. He drug his tongue over his lower lip and then grinned. "You're gonna make me do this to Michael Jackson? I dunno, pretty boy, that's a lot to ask."

It was obvious that the music wouldn't deter Billy, though. He reached out and slid his hands over Steve's hips and his sides. Without warning, he tugged Steve down further on the seats so that he could wrap his legs around Billy's hips. At the same time, Billy dropped himself down, catching the seat as he did for balance. He pressed his lips to the mark he had just left and then rolled his hips against Steve.

As soon as their cocks moved together, Billy tensed. He slid a hand from Steve's side to just along his lower back, brushing over those fucking dimples of his before pulling him up to meet his hips.

Steve let out a small yelp of surprise when Billy pulled him down onto the seats. Though he'd never done this before, his body responded instinctually, wrapped his legs quickly around Billy. His inner thighs tensed and squeezed around Billy. He let out a low moan when Billy began moving against him. He was hard already and Steve screwed his eyes tightly closed for a moment and licked his lips. It

threw him off balance, though, when Billy hauled him up. Sometimes, Steve forgot just how fucking *strong* Billy was.

His hands slid across Billy's firm back and he licked his lips again as he felt his cock twitch. His voice was breathy as he looked at Billy's face, "I'll change it if you want..." Steve wasn't trying to coax the blonde, but he couldn't stop the needy roll of his hips, felt Billy's cock drag against his own. Steve pressed their foreheads together a moment, not kissing Billy as he kept moving his hips, emitting soft gasps of pleasure. He struggled to keep his eyes open, focused on Billy's own blue eyes.

"No, it's okay," Billy's concentration wasn't on the music, anyway, *for once*. His eyes were on Steve so he could soak in every damned detail of his face and body as he arched beneath him. It was sort of difficult, considering how close Steve wanted to be, but he took in what he could. He gasped, his breath hot against Steve's cheek as their cocks pushed together again.

"Can I...?" Billy reached down with his free hand and grabbed the bottle of lube that had fallen to the floorboard. He tilted his head so he could kiss Steve's forehead and then his brow bone. He trailed his kisses down to his lips, but he didn't kiss him. Instead, he bit his lower lip and tugged gently. The hand on the small of Steve's back stayed there, his fingers digging into the muscle. It kept Steve still as they ground together, breathless while that damned song played in the background.

Steve nodded quickly, his voice soft, "Yeah, yeah..." Steve groaned when Billy took his lip and pulled it slowly. He gasped sharply in quick succession, his eyes closing again as he felt that familiar twitch of pleasure in his spine. He reached up with one hand, grasped Billy's jaw and kissed him hungrily and desperately. Steve insisted his way into the blonde's mouth before he sucked his tongue hard and loudly. The song changed to something soft and slow and it made the noises that Steve made seem so much louder, even his his own ears.

He slid a hand into the nape of Billy's neck as he writhed as much as Billy's firm hand would allow, Steve growing desperate for more friction. Steve whispered hotly, barely pulling back, "I want you so goddamn bad--"

Despite being on top of Steve, Billy felt himself lose control for a moment as he was kissed. He moaned into Steve's mouth and rutted against Steve's body. He gasped as they parted and he forced the bottle open with his finger. The popping noise made him pause and the sudden realization that he was going to be inside of Steve, to see him writhe and moan for him, sent fucking chills down his spine.

It was only then that Billy removed his hand from Steve's back. He tipped the bottle upside down and squeezed a decent amount of lube across his left hand's index and middle finger. After he was sure there was enough, he grinned at Steve.

"Spread your legs for me, Steve," Billy reached his right hand to Steve's thigh and stroked along the skin. "Put this leg up on the hatshelf." He tapped Steve's leg. Doing that would spread him wide, force him to sprawl out beneath him without being able to hide anything.

Steve was breathing harshly when Billy finally spoke, and it felt sobering from the high Steve was pushing himself into. He knew what Billy wanted, but Steve hesitated for a few seconds before he moved his leg away from Billy's hip and placed it high above the back seat. He swallowed and made sure not to cover himself or something equally embarrassing. It was hard to imagine him covering himself with any other sexual partner. Steve certainly hadn't in the past, but nobody looked at him quite the way Billy did.

Steve's stomach clenched hard when he caught Billy's eyes. He wanted to make some sort of wise ass comment, but it was hard to breathe under Billy's gaze. A flush spread across his face and the only thing he could hear for a moment was the sound of his own heavy breathing. Steve was painfully hard against his stomach, he felt his cock twitch again and he knew Billy caught it. His right hand gripped the edge of the seat under him, dug his nails into the soft leather and twist.

Billy, of course, took the time to look over Steve. He slid himself closer and moved his clean hand to Steve's stomach. He stroked his fingers over his muscles, making sure to brush along his cock as he dipped his lubed fingers in between Steve's cheeks and over his hole. He bit his lower lip as he rubbed his index finger over the tight

bundle of muscle. He leaned down and slid his tongue over one of Steve's nipples as he eased that finger into his body--knuckle by knuckle.

"Fuck, Steve," Billy murmured and then grazed his teeth over the tightening nub. He bit gently as he stroked along Steve's walls, playing more than anything else. He looked up at Steve and grinned as he curled and uncurled his finger and began to move his hand back and forth, easing his finger in and out of Steve's body. He wouldn't add another finger. Not yet.

It was strange and awkward at first, feeling so exposed, but as Billy slowly slid his finger in, Steve inhaled sharply. He concentrated on the sensations, just as he did last time. Steve let out a soft moan when Billy teased his nipple. His chest rose up to meet the blonde's mouth before it was gone and Steve was left with just that finger curled inside his body.

He was barely aware that he had been arching his hips, slow at first, but picking up speed as Steve tried to make Billy find his prostate like last time. Steve felt the digit graze the spot and it left him hissing in pleasure as he looked down for a moment, tried to press his hips down hard and make Billy touch him there again.

The amazing thing about Steve was it didn't matter what they did or how far it went. He was always responsive, always arching, *always* making noise. It pooled heat into Billy's stomach and made him dizzy. He let out a sharp breath against Steve's chest as he felt each roll of Steve's hips, each push down into his finger until suddenly they stuttered and Steve hissed.

Ah, there it was. Billy's grin widened and he pushed his finger into that spot again. At the same time, he wedged the second finger in next to the first. He was hoping that the pleasure from hitting Steve's prostate would negate the sting from the second finger. He sank both fingers into that spot now, but didn't just leave them there. He began to move his fingers back and forth again, fucking right into that sensitive bundle of nerves.

Billy's cock pulsed and his breath became choppy as Steve's body continued to respond to his hand. It was hard to control himself at

this point. Steve's body was tight around his fingers, clenching every time he moved just right. All he could think about was the dizzying heat and pleasure that he would feel with Steve around his cock.

Steve's thighs tensed as he gasped sharply before he closed his eyes tightly and bit down hard on his lower lip. The last time Billy did this to him, Steve needed to be quiet, and he actually had to remember he didn't have to be quiet now. Steve could be as loud as he wanted, and he fucking *wanted* Billy to hear him. He *wanted* Billy to know exactly how he made Steve feel. Steve released his lip and let go, loudly moaned out Billy's name as he arched his back up off the seat. He raised an arm above his head and pressed his palm hard against the door as Steve rocked down quickly on Billy's fingers, cursed, and whimpered out Billy's name.

Steve panted harshly, his face flushed as he looked down and immediately caught Billy's gaze. Billy was watching him, taking him in, and it made Steve flush darker, but he wasn't going to disappoint Billy. Billy waited just as long as Steve did, so he couldn't rush this, no matter how amazing it felt to be touched again. Steve slowed down for a few seconds and licked his lips. He was aware he was breathing harshly, and he had a little trouble coming down, even for just a few minutes. Steve held Billy's gaze, forced his own eyes to remain open and on Billy's blue eyes--stormy blue and beautiful. He could feel that energy crashing inside him in large waves, willingly pulling him down into the undertow, and Steve was drowning in the sensations, drowning in Billy's eyes.

His leg that had been around Billy's hip moved forward slowly, his knee bent upright as his toes curled. Steve rubbed his inner thigh back and forth along Billy's side, teasing the blonde achingly slow. Steve kept his hand braced against the door as one of his hands reached down and squeezed the top of Billy's strong thigh. He felt the muscles there, Steve imaged Billy using them in order to take him, to push *inside* him. Steve bit down on his lip again. He willed those sparks into his fingertips and dragged his nails gently against Billy's flesh. Steve arched his hips as he did so, rising and falling with Billy's fingers.

Everything Steve did knocked Billy a little higher. He wasn't even sure how someone could cause pleasure without even touching, but

Steve's moans, the way his back arched, and how he was looking at Billy? Inviting him to simply *eat him alive* ? Billy shuddered and continued to slip his fingers into Steve's body. He rubbed them along the tight walls, purposefully moving away from the spot inside of Steve that drove him crazy. Instead, he began to spread and curl his fingers.

Then, Steve threw Billy for a loop and let his electricity run across his thigh and into his body. He twitched and gasped. His fingers stopped for a moment and his cock twitched. Fuck. He breathed in slowly through his mouth and looked up at Steve again. His own energy, his *power* , took that electricity and spread it throughout his body. It made him shake for a moment, his eyes falling closed as he simply *felt* Steve. The electricity that coursed through him *was* Steve. To him, it was basically like having him inside of his body, bone-fucking deep.

Billy reached down with his free hand and grabbed Steve's from his thigh. He tangled their fingers together and leaned over him. He kept the two digits inside of Steve's body pushed deep and began to brush against that spot again as he pressed their lips together. Immediately, Billy parted his lips and slipped his tongue over Steve's mouth before pushing inside. He explored the other teen's mouth while squeezing his hand.

As soon as Billy broke the kiss, he murmured, "I love you," against Steve's lips and *dammit* he knew this meant more than just fucking. His heart leapt in his chest and to distract himself, he kissed Steve again. And not once did his fingers stop moving inside of Steve, working him open.

Steve let out a whimpering moan and he was gasping underneath Billy, rolling his hips to Billy's fingers to a tempo that his body knew, but he did not. His hand that was braced against the door came down across Billy's back, felt the strong muscles of his back and shoulders stretching over Steve as the blonde moved. He let his energy drag there was well, his blunt nails digging into the muscles there.

He moaned into Billy's mouth, panting as he got closer and his pelvis arched under him. Steve felt Billy's own hard cock brush against his thigh, his ass, as he moved for Billy. "I love you more than anything

—nnn, fuck Billy, you're going to make me cum—" Steve whimpered into Billy's mouth, held onto Billy's shoulders and kept him there, impossibly close as he panted over Billy's face.

Steve struggled to force his eyes to remain open and he shook in pleasure. "It's always gonna be you, always—Billy—don't fucking stop if I cum, don't you fucking dare—" He held on, held back, even when he had to shut his eyes and his thighs shook. Steve pressed his forehead to Billy's, his left leg slid down from the back seat and wrapped over Billy's hip. His nails dug harder into Billy's shoulders, "Just you, just you—"

Billy grunted as Steve's nails dug into him, but he didn't mind. In fact, he liked the sudden sting of pain. Just because he healed doesn't mean he didn't feel it, and the rolling electricity that followed made him gasp. He bit Steve's lower lip again and then kissed from his lips to just below his jaw. He sucked the skin there as he began to drug his fingers over the sensitive spot inside of Steve. He began to pump into him with his fingers.

The tautness in Billy's body was all arousal, but he was determined to make Steve feel beyond fucked-out. He didn't care if he'd have to get him hard again--making Steve fall apart twice? Why the fuck not? He untangled his fingers from Steve's hand and reached down to wrap his hand around his cock. His lips quirked into a smirk against Steve's skin and he began to stroke him while his other hand took advantage of his tight body.

"I want to feel you cum," Billy murmured. He kissed a line along his throat and ran his thumb over the head of his cock. He backed up, then, enough that Steve would have to let go of him. It was a last second decision to do this, but he decided that Steve's reaction would be worth it. He held the base of Steve's cock and leaned down to slid his lips over just the head. He drug the flat of his tongue over the pre-cum there. Before Steve could protest, before he could pull Billy back up, he opened his mouth and swallowed Steve down.

All the while, Billy's fingers were moving inside of Steve, dipping, teasing, and dragging across every muscle.

Steve cried out loudly and screwed his eyes tightly closed as one of

his clawed at the seat and the other fisted in Billy's hair. Despite Billy's words, he was still trying to hold back, his thighs quaking. The radio turned up loudly for a few seconds before it was abruptly cut, the dashboard and overhead door light flickered when Steve broke, because Billy wasn't going to *stop* , so Steve finally gave into the rising tide that overtook him. He screamed and arched his pelvis up into Billy's wet, warm mouth as Steve let out several loud, desperate moans when he finally came.

Tears gathered in his eyes from the intensity of it as he started to cum inside Billy's mouth, his legs closing around the blonde's head as he shook and cried out. He rocked his hips to the rhythm of his spurts until he was finished and fell back into the seat, his stomach clenching in exertion as he panted and rested one forearm over his face. "Fuck, fuck, fuck..."

Steve tried to catch his breath and gingerly released the curls he'd been holding onto. His body spasmed in pleasure and Steve's right leg dropped from around Billy, fell onto the floor. He was a little breathless, mostly in shock, as his orgasmic high soared through every fiber of his being. it rolled out flat the energy inside him, so flat it stretched across his entire body, from the tips of his toes, to his hair, buzzing all over.

Of course, Billy took everything Steve had to give him--swallowing down his cum and pushing his fingers that much harder--to ride out his orgasm. When Steve finally collapsed back against the seat, Billy slid his mouth from his cock. He licked his lips and grinned. It had been amusing to hear the radio flare and cut off, to know that the electricity inside of Steve had burst just like Steve had. Luckily, Billy hadn't been shocked, but he could feel the warmth from it dancing over his skin.

The two fingers inside of Steve hadn't been removed, though. They stayed there, and Billy's smirk widened as he slid them deep. He knew Steve was over-sensitive. He knew this could be too much, but he couldn't resist. At least, not when Steve looked like this--flushed, panting, and *wrecked* . He bit his lower lip as he pulled his fingers back almost entirely out before pushing them back in.

"You're gorgeous," Steve *was* . Billy wasn't sure why, but the small

sparks and the light that sometimes flared around his skin just made him seem... ethereal? It distracted him enough from his own arousal that it wasn't as important for him to get off. He watched Steve quietly and that smirk fell into a warm smile. "You okay there, sweetheart?"

Steve gave a quick jerk of his head and nodded as he whimpered a little, his voice a little hoarse from his cries and need, "Y-yeah, yes..." He tilted his hips up slowly when Billy began to move his fingers again. He knew what Billy was doing, getting him ready for Billy to actually fuck him. Steve told Billy not to stop, and he truly wanted that, but everything buzzed louder inside him, thrummed in pleasure like the constant hum of a generator. When those fingers curled, he let out a sharp gasp, his body still so sensitive as his toes curled again and he turned his head to the side.

Steve screwed his eyes closed again, his body taut before it began to move against Billy's fingers again. The vein on the side of his neck bulged under the strain of the sensations. "Ahh, I love you--!" And Steve said it rushed, almost as if it physically hurt him to say it, but it was just a thought amongst his many at the moment that he *had* to say to Billy. It was impossible to look at him, like Steve might explode into a million stars if he did, as Steve's hand blindly reached out for the blonde's. When he found it, Steve interlocked their fingers, and he knew Billy could feel him pulsing with power, ready to burn down with Billy. Steve's mouth fell open as he panted loudly, exhaling his pleasure.

When their fingers laced together, Billy's smile grew. He leaned down to brush his lips over Steve's neck. His own body felt like a fucking torch. He was hot from his arousal and even more so from the little waves of heat that Steve kept giving off. Of course, at this point, his cock was aching. Watching Steve unravel was always a stomach-coiling, orgasm-inducing sight. There was no other way to describe it.

"Steve, I really..." Billy breathed in shakily and squeezed Steve's hand. "I *really* want to--to be inside of you," he stumbled over his words because he *was* going to say 'fuck,' but that's not what this was. He was also one of the worst people to admit his feelings or actually be honest about what *this* was, so how was he supposed to say it? *Making love* was not going to come out of his mouth.

"Can I?" Billy eased his fingers as deeply as he could get them and then ran his thumb over the stressed skin. He massaged just enough to slip the edge of his thumb into Steve's body. He was teasing while he waited for Steve's response, his muscles tight from need.

Steve let out a half-laugh at Billy's question. They were endearing, ridiculous, and so *hesitant* that Steve couldn't help himself. This was the part he knew would be difficult for Billy, and they didn't have to conversation about what this was--Steve could *feel* it. So for one brief moment, Steve knew he had the upper hand, but he wasn't about to torture Billy. Steve wanted this just as badly.

He licked his lips and swallowed thickly as he turned his head back to face Billy, eyed the blonde watching him and he let out another soft laugh as he arched his hips. "I might actually kill you if you don't..."

They were both nervous for entirely different reasons, even if Billy would never actually cop to his own anxiety. Putting Billy at ease, putting a little bite back into it to allow Billy a toe into his comfort zone--Steve could do that. He untangled his hand from Billy's for a moment and pressed his hand to Billy's chest, dragged it down over his chest and pectorals. His voice was husky but soft with need, "You're the sexiest thing I've ever fucking seen, Billy Hargrove..." It stroked Billy's ego, but it sounded sincere because Steve truly felt that way. Steve was breathing harder again, slowly, as he glanced up at the blonde, held his gaze there, "My King Billy..."

Billy almost rolled his eyes when Steve threatened to kill him, but the smile on his lips betrayed his fake annoyance. He glanced down at Steve and then held his breath as Steve's hand moved down his chest. He tried to ignore the sliver of panic, of self-doubt, as he felt those fingers move over his scars. No matter what they were doing--from random playing to being wrapped around each other--Steve never made him feel insecure. But Billy had always been one to show off, to wear as minimal clothing as possible. It wasn't the same anymore, but Steve didn't seem to be deterred by them. Which, he could admit, was all that mattered to him.

"I don't know about that," Billy scoffed and curled his fingers inside of Steve, purposefully hitting *that spot* again just to distract him. He

reached down and grabbed the bottle of lube with his free hand and popped the cap. Finally, Billy slid his fingers out of Steve's body. He poured some of the lube onto his hand and then stroked himself. The cool lube made him hiss, but at least it warmed up quickly. He licked his lips in that ridiculous way as Steve watched him and then chuckled.

Steve groaned and arched up when Billy pressed his fingers inside him again and he writhed there before Billy pulled his hand away. Since the lab, Steve gave Billy space, let him take control. It was important for Billy to have some control in his life, even if it was only over Steve. Steve was protective of the kids, tried to take care of everyone, but Billy took care of *him* .

He watched Billy stroke himself and then wag his tongue at Steve, who smiled widely, the familiar gesture tugged at his heart. Steve's legs were draped over Billy's thighs, bent at the knee over his hips. Steve was scared of this, not what it meant, but not pleasing Billy, not being able to live up to his expectations and fantasies. Steve chewed his lower lip and scooted himself a little further down, closer to Billy. His fears were normal, Steve knew that, but Billy was still reeling from what happened to him, what he went through.

Steve reached down and grabbed Billy's wrist, stilled his hand, as he looked at Billy intently. His heart raced as his fingertips dragged from Billy's hand to his cock, stroked him slowly as he exhaled shakily. Steve was already consumed with that energy and he knew Billy felt it as he touched him, stroked him while he spread the lubricant. "I *do* know, nobody is *ever* going to be as good as you, Billy, all I'm ever going to think about is *your* body, *your* voice when you're with me. Only you can do this for me, to me, because you're my fucking King Billy..."

Steve licked his own lips at the hitch of Billy's breath and arched against him. He wasn't flustered any more than when Billy had been touching him, and he made sure to punctuate each word before he gently pressed Billy's cock to his ass. "And I fucking want all of you, babe..."

Billy faltered when Steve took over. His hips rolled forward and he couldn't help the moan that tumbled from his lips. His stomach

muscles clenched as his hips moved again, forcing his cock through Steve's hand. Fuck. He breathed in slowly and looked over Steve's body. He was avoiding his eyes for obvious reasons. He hated that he was insecure about his body. That was the *one* thing he had been okay with until he and Steve became a thing. Steve helped him accept parts of himself that he had hated, but fuck. He didn't even like touching or looking at the scars.

As Steve angled Billy's cock against his hole, he shuddered. It was shitty to let himself be bitter at a moment like this, so he pushed those thoughts off to the wayside and smiled at Steve, instead. "When did you become such a smooth talker, Harrington?" He teased as he leaned over Steve's body. He settled one hand on the seat, the other holding the base of his cock as he began to push forward. "Tell me if I need slow down or stop, okay?" His voice was breathy at that point, the head of his cock pushing passed the tight rim of Steve's ass.

Steve inhaled sharply and did his best to hold still. It was incredibly different compared to Billy's fingers, thicker sure, but the heat and pulse to it--that was what Steve noticed first. His eyes slipped closed for a moment and he let out a few soft gasps as Billy sank into him at an agonizingly slow pace. He expected it to hurt, but it didn't. Billy had seen to that. It was just more a full feeling that Steve wasn't quite used to, but he was positive he could get used to it.

He opened his eyes slowly to look up at Billy. They were both guys and he knew personally just how different it felt to be on the giving end of things, did he feel okay for Billy? One of his hands pressed again to Billy's chest and he took the blonde in. Billy was really, really beautiful, aglow in little bit of night light that illuminated the interior of the car. When Billy bottomed out inside him, he moved his hand to Billy's cheek, Steve's own breathing picking up. His words were soft and full, "You're perfect, babe...."

The heat surrounded his cock made Billy dizzy. The arm holding him up above Steve shook as he finally settled against Steve, his hips nestled against Steve's thighs. His eyes were lidded half-way, focused only on Steve's face as he fought the urge to just begin moving, to start that delicious pull and push that he knew would cause pleasure to bloom from his spine and rush over his body. His fingers dug into the seat as the idea of being inside of *Steve Harrington* kept crashing

over him.

Fuck.

“Not sure about that, pretty boy,” Billy murmured. He moved one hand to Steve’s hip. He stroked his thumb over his hip bone first before dragging his palm over his side and up along his chest. His nails drug over one of Steve’s nipples, and at the same time, he pulled his hips back before sinking forward again.

It wasn’t much--just enough for Steve to feel a little bit of loss and then full again. Yet, Billy groaned. He leaned down and pressed his forehead against Steve’s. “Thinkin’ you’re the perfect one here.” His words were punctuated with another thrust, except this time it was a bit faster, a bit harder. He kissed Steve, then, and began a steady pace. He knew it was gentle. He knew it wasn’t what he normally would have done. But this... this wasn’t fucking.

Billy was *making love* to Steve, and his heart clattered against his chest as he finally admitted it to himself. He shuddered and drove his hips forward again, sinking what seemed to be impossibly deep.

Steve was far from perfect. He felt like he was a constant fuck up, a disappointment to those he cared for, and there was no way anybody in their right mind was ever going to think he was attractive as Billy. Those thoughts normally rolled around in Steve’s head every day, every hour. He was always waiting for something to happen, to say something, that he would even slightly regret. And then he harped on it, thought about it until it made him sick. But when Billy pushed inside him slowly, slowly built himself up, those thoughts were gone, and all Steve could think was: *Billy, Billy, Billy* .

He shook a little when Billy kissed him and he exhaled against his lips before Steve sucked his lower lip, one of his arms wrapping around the blonde’s back. He found himself moving in time to Billy’s thrusts, once again his body dancing in a way he didn’t know that it knew. Steve was moaning, it was quiet at first, compared to how he normally was, before Billy thrust a little harder, *deeper* , and he cried out then.

Steve wrapped his legs tighter around Billy’s waist, over his hips, and

when Billy sank back in again he couldn't stop himself from letting out a laugh and swearing. "Ahh--fuck--!" He felt a little lightheaded for a moment. He didn't hear himself repeatedly saying that he loved Billy then, but he could feel it on his tongue, thick and heavy, as he turned his head, panting over Billy's face.

Billy couldn't find his voice. He would tell Steve about how gorgeous he was. How amazing he sounded. How Billy couldn't close his eyes because he didn't want to miss a second of Steve squirming against the seat. His voice wouldn't work, though, because the wash of emotions through him left him fucking *speechless*. At that moment, it didn't matter what kind of monster they had turned him into. It didn't matter that he didn't feel normal anymore, that his blood constantly sang and his mind was always mapping out people's bodies subconsciously.

Steve was all that mattered.

Desperate to feel Steve, *all of him*, Billy wrapped one of his arms beneath Steve's back. He leaned down at the same time that he pulled Steve up, forcing their bodies together. Steve would be able to feel the way he was shaking, the way his muscles clenched as he thrust forward, bottoming out into Steve's body before pulling back and doing it all over again. The hand that had kept his balance finally eased so that he was resting on his elbow. All of his weight pushed there, instead, so that he could hold Steve against his body.

Being this close allowed Billy's necklace to drop and rest on Steve's chest, pressed between them. The coolness of the chain made Billy shiver, and the fact that Steve got him a titanium chain to protect it from breaking forced his hips to pivot harder, to take Steve faster. Billy's harsh breaths and little gasps were muffled against Steve's neck. He didn't make a lot of noise, but fuck, did his breathing sound loud in the quiet car.

Steve wrapped both of his arms around Billy, scrambling over his back to feel him, to get a hold of Billy and himself. He could feel those sparks building inside him as he cried out Billy's name, and when Billy brushed that bundle of nerves inside him, Steve felt himself light up. It wasn't so dissimilar to the first time he hurt Billy, but it was spread throughout his entire body instead of just his hands.

It was contained inside him as the voltage jumped over and between every vein inside him, like lightning between trees in a forest.

He was speaking to Billy, maybe babbling his name or that he loved him, Steve honestly couldn't really tell. His heart raced and his legs tightened, slung low over Billy's hips when the blonde began to move faster. When Steve tilted his hips to desperately meet Billy's, his eyes were wet and he closed them quickly and saw a clear night sky behind his eyes. There was every constellation, every star there, and Steve felt more alive than he ever felt before in his life. Every emotion he ever felt paled in comparison to this moment, whether that was his insecurity as King Steve, what he thought he had with Nancy, or even his terror in those damp tunnels. It was all gone and only Billy Hargrove was left.

Steve butted his head against Billy's, buried in his neck, until the blonde moved it enough for Steve to take his mouth. His arms slid up under Billy's, both of his hands held onto Billy's shoulders before he dragged his nails down. Steve kissed him feverishly, everything so bright and right there for the taking, because Billy was *his*. Steve might have said *mine* or *more* against Billy's lips, or maybe even both, but he only pulled back for air in a hiss when it was solely needed. His cock pressed between their stomachs, and Steve cried out louder the closer he became. Pressed his forehead to Billy's as he struggled to keep his eyes open, to watch Billy, panted and gasped into Billy's mouth as he stole Billy's breath in return.

And it seemed like Steve's electricity, his energy, only keyed Billy up further. The masculine teen was shaking and gasping against Steve's mouth. His mind was everywhere but nowhere. On the vibrations inside of his body, the digging sting of Steve's nails, the impossibly tight heat around his cock. Steve's *words*. But then, because apparently it wasn't enough, his energy swamped them and returned the favor to Steve, running through his body, fueling the little pops of electricity and pleasure, unraveling muscles and coaxing bliss out of him.

Billy could *see* Steve's body, his pleasure, and suddenly, he didn't feel like a monster anymore. While he physically explored Steve's body, his mind traveled and did everything possible to feel beyond that. It left Billy breathless, dizzy, and so unbelievably caught up in Steve

that they didn't feel like two people anymore.

This didn't even feel like making *love* to Billy anymore. It was more than that, but were there even words for it? It was an exchange of their beings, their very essence, and Billy knew that if he hadn't gone through what had happened to him, it wouldn't have been like this.

Billy pushed himself up a bit to break their barely-there kiss. He opened his eyes to look down at Steve, and god damn, was the warmth in his body spreading at just the look of him. He sank his hips forward and shifted the arm he was leaning on up high enough so he could tangle his fingers into Steve's hair.

Steve felt another spark light up inside him, Billy knew how much he loved that, Steve's own guilty pleasure. His head tilted back as Billy threaded his fingers across his scalp and his entire body arched with the motion, his back and hips lifted from the seat as he moved his body up to meet Billy's.

Much like their first night together, the night they became drunk and touched each other for the first time, Steve kissed and sucked at the skin. He softly sucked at Billy's hard pulse in his wrist, nudging his head against his hand to bite at his palm. Steve turned his head up higher to take Billy's fingers into his mouth. He bit them gently, sucked the skin between them, before that hand was back in his hair again.

He felt his hips moving faster, reaching a fever pitch as he tried to hold out longer, stay there with Billy. Steve's body shook hard the closer he got, and he was fucking grateful he held out this long. If Billy hadn't made him come first, it would have been over so quickly, because Steve hadn't expected it to be this pleasurable, the emotion and the electricity there so *strongly* . He didn't know how they made it so far without this, without feeling this close to one another, but now that it happened, *was still happening* , nothing was going to be the same between them when they both knew they could have this.

It was a plea and a promise that tumbled out of Steve's mouth as he edged closer to his release, "Only you--only you--!" It was all Steve managed to say, his large eyes looking at Billy's, blue as the sky after a storm had passed.

As soon as Steve's mouth slid over his hand and circled his fingers, Billy's hips stuttered. He gasped and rolled himself forward, pressing his chest as closely as he could to Steve's as he continued to push into his body--continued to feel Steve's body pulse and tighten around him. He exhaled harshly and pressed his fingers against Steve's tongue. Between Steve's mouth and his body, Billy was alight and he felt like was going to fucking explode--similar to the way Steve's energy did whenever Billy closed his eyes and 'watched' him.

Catching Steve's gaze was all that Billy needed to tumble over. He managed to keep his eyes open for only a few seconds after his orgasm shot through his body, forcing his eyes to snap closed. He bit his lower lip and moaned as his thrusts became erratic, untimed and messy. His arm tightened around Steve's waist, pulling him closer, and his head dropped so that he could kiss and bite Steve's neck as he rode out the crushing waves of pleasure into Steve's body.

Billy's energy was similar to fire, then, as it stretched out and encased them both, pulsing along their skin and *protecting* them. It didn't have anything to protect them against, but it was Billy's need to keep Steve safe, to keep him here with him, to not lose him again--to not feel the anguish of thinking he'd never be able to touch him again.

The pressure of Billy's teeth on his neck as Steve felt the blonde spill inside his body, rut desperately against that spot inside him when Billy came, caused Steve to cry out. The lights inside the car flashed behind Steve's eyes when he closed them and when he felt Billy's stomach clench hard against his cock, Billy's hips slamming into him, he screamed as he followed the blonde.

Steve didn't cum so hard that he saw stars, everything, *everything* , left him. There was only Billy and him in the car, in the entire world, and it was all Steve needed. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, as he spurted hot ropes of cum between their stomachs. Steve fell back onto the seat, and he didn't realize he was sweating until he felt the chill on his skin as he shook. It took a long time to come down from his high, to physically feel the weight of Billy's body when Steve felt so light.

It didn't seem like Billy was anywhere near coming to himself, either. He held Steve tightly as his body shivered in the aftermath of his

orgasm, of feeling Steve's orgasm. He pressed his cheek against Steve's shoulder and tried his best not to crush him with his weight, but fuck, he was suddenly exhausted. Maybe neither of them had truly slept since Steve had pulled him out of there. Maybe this is what they had needed--this *joining* .

Billy pressed his lips to Steve's shoulder and opened his eyes. He blinked a few times to put the car into focus. His limbs felt like rubber, but he managed to push himself up enough to look down at Steve. His lips fell into a warm smile as he looked him over.

"Hey, pretty boy," Billy murmured. He slid his fingers through Steve's hair again and then leaned to kiss his forehead. "You okay?"

Steve's breath was raspy as he panted and licked his lips, tried to force the world back into focus. He opened his eyes slowly and looked up at Billy, took in his smile and the tingle he felt when Billy's hand was back in his hair. Steve couldn't really imagine what he looked like, he wasn't just relaxed, Steve was sure he'd melted.

He chuckled at first, unable to stop himself before he was laughing loudly in delight, and it bubbled out of his soul, light and warm and *happy* . Steve brought Billy down against him, kissed him slowly with a wide smile on his lips. He couldn't ever recall feeling this way, certainly not after sex before. Steve murmured against his lips as he grinned, "That was the best sex of my entire—" He laughed again, unable to come down from his high, "It was fucking *amazing*— I think I shorted my stereo—" Steve turned his head towards it, but that was funny too, how the intensity of what they did caused him to short circuit his radio.

Billy smiled into the kiss, just as amused as Steve. When Steve broke the kiss, he brushed his fingers from Steve's hair to his cheek. He ran his thumb along Steve's cheekbone after Steve turned his head. He moved to brush his fingers from Steve's cheek to his neck. There was a definite bite there, one that would bruise, but he didn't think Steve would care. Hell, Billy wasn't going to heal the bruised skin. That mark meant something to him.

"Me, too," Steve was right. Billy had experience, and he knew Steve did, as well. But nothing could be compared to this. It wasn't even on

the same damned scale. “And I can always fix your radio. Although, I’m thinking it was appropriate, considering you were playing *Michael Jackson* .” He reached down and pinched Steve’s side.

When Steve was reaching towards his orgasm, “mine” had slipped past his lips several times, like a mantra. That mark was Billy’s own version of the mantra, a way to tell the world that Steve was his. Steve turned his head back to look at Billy in genuine curiosity, his smile fading a second to ask, “You know how to do that?” And then Steve grinned again, felt his stomach do a little flip at the prospect of Billy fixing his car.

But when Billy pinched him, Steve jerked a little to his side, let out a tiny yelp of surprise, and his eyes widened. “Don’t--don’t you fucking dare, Billy--it only played for a few minutes before we started--” Steve was acutely aware of Billy’s weight still on top of him, holding him down in place as Steve quickly shook his head.

“Don’t do what?” Billy asked, but his voice was deceptively soft and the grin that was spreading over his lips spelled *trouble* for Steve. He anchored one of his hands on Steve’s chest, clearly keeping him still as the hand that pinched him began to slide along Steve’s skin. He curled his fingers and then began to tickle along Steve’s sides.

Oh, Billy knew Steve would get him for this, but he didn’t care. He knew this would make Steve laugh, probably writhe, and he couldn’t help the temptation. The air in the car was too light, too fucking happy for him not to. Besides, he hadn’t done it the last time Steve warned him not to. And he didn’t *specify* what Billy wasn’t supposed to be doing.

They both expected it, and Steve bit down on his lower lip to not give him the *satisfaction* , but as Billy’s fingertips kept dancing over his skin, Steve couldn’t help but bark out a loud laugh before he just broke under his touch. He arched his whole body up, squirming wildly under the blonde, who held him firmly in place. Steve yelled several times, tried to kick his legs, but Billy was still between them, and all Steve could do was flail, shriek, and jerk on the seat until tears came to his eyes.

Steve’s stomach clenched from laughing so hard and he tried to use

his hands to push Billy away until those were pinned under one of Billy's hands. "Please--please PLEASE, truce truce--"

Billy laughed as Steve started to squirm and whine at him. He was still seated inside of Steve, so he could feel him writhe, and his heart kicked up at it. Shit. He should probably actually call a truce. He chuckled and stopped, raising his hands in a placating gesture before leaning down to kiss Steve's cheek.

"You're ridiculous, Steve," Billy mused before he sat up again. "D'you think we should head back? I don't want to make them worry." Despite the fact that he missed being alone with Steve, he knew Joyce would start worrying. He squeezed Steve's hips and slowly eased out of him. He was careful, too, knowing what that felt like.

Steve wiped the tears from his eyes, still smiling, until Billy moved. He gasped softly when Billy pulled away from him and exhaled a little shakily. It was a really strange feeling, to go from being so full to somewhat empty now, like a loss Steve didn't know was possible. He frowned a moment and didn't answer Billy. Instead, he brought Billy down and kissed him tenderly. Steve would've asked Billy for another round if he thought he could take it, but Steve already knew he was at his limit and he suspected Billy might feel the same way.

He sucked Billy's lower lip slowly, slid one hand gently against the nape of his neck. Steve whispered against his lips, "I really do love you, babe, and that was the most amazing thing I've ever..." Steve swallowed, moved his fingers in Billy's curls, it was already starting to grow back to where it used to be.

Billy paused as he was pulled down for a kiss. He smiled into it and then shivered as Steve's hand moved over his neck. He dipped his tongue over Steve's lower lip before pulling away just enough to look down at him. "What're you doing, getting all sappy on me." But Billy was still smiling, his expression softened by the way Steve was looking at him.

"And you know I love you, too," Billy slid his fingers into Steve's hair, pushing several locks out of his face. He shifted back, then, and settled on the seat. "Shit. What I wouldn't do for a cigarette. Hell. Maybe a blowjob." He grinned at Steve and shook his head.

Steve rolled his eyes and pushed him gently. He sat up in the seat gingerly and wondered if he was going to have to clean his car. Probably a good idea. He arched an eyebrow. "You want a blowjob after all that?" Steve shook his head and then smirked at him. "I guess next time I'll just have to *ride* you until you can't move, huh? That is, *if* you can handle that, Hargrove." Steve leaned over and kissed him deeply before he nipped Billy's lip and patted his cheek.

"And you're going to fucking drive. Gimme my pants." Steve grabbed his sweater and slipped it over his head, rolling down the back window just a little as he looked at the hand print there on the glass. Yeah, he needed to clean the car.

"Riding me is an option," Billy's grin widened and then disappeared as Steve kissed him. He returned it just as eagerly and then sighed as Steve pulled away to get dressed again. "Clothes are overrated." He muttered and reached down. He grabbed Steve's pants and chucked them at his face. "I'll drive, but I'm telling you right now--it's not as good as the Camaro." Which he fucking missed. It was obvious by the dip in his voice.

Billy climbed out of the car after grabbing his clothes. He shivered in the cold and yanked on his pants and just the hoodie. He shut the back door and climbed into the driver's seat. He was still shivering when he closed the door and he glared at the snow. "I don't like the cold," he told Steve matter-of-factly, his lips pursed. Give him a beach any day. Snow was bullshit.

As Billy turned the car on, the engine rolled over, but didn't start. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Steve. "I'll be right back. I'm gonna make sure everything is good." He leaned down and released the hood. Leave it to Steve to do something to the actual car battery. He climbed back out and popped the hood. His skin crawled in the cold and he almost laughed. The electricity that Steve had pumped out had dislodged one of the battery terminals. He hesitated and then wrapped the sleeve of his hoodie around his hand so he could reposition it.

"Fucking swear," Billy muttered as he shut the hood. He made his way back to the driver's seat and plopped down. "Come on, baby, start." He murmured as he turned the key. The engine turned over,

then started, and he ‘woop’ed, laughing.

Steve peered at him from the back as he arched his hips as he pulled up his pants and briefs. He laughed as Billy laughed and leaned forward, wrapped his arms around Billy from the back seat. Steve moved in closer, grinned against his ear, “I guess you turned me on twice tonight.” He nipped and sucked his earlobe, smiling still, both of them still a little deliriously happy following their orgasms.

Steve planted soft kisses along the side of Billy’s face and jaw, squeezing him a little tighter. “You better cut me up a slice of pie. We didn’t even stay for pie. How is it Christmas without pie?” Steve slid his hand down the neck of Billy’s hoodie, smirking against his cheek. Truthfully Steve didn’t want to go back, to being careful around Billy, and he sincerely wished they could just go back to his own home. Steve usually hated the loneliness there, but that was before Billy came into his life. The idea of following up on his promise to ride Billy already gave Steve a little jolt of excitement.

“Pie, a shower, and maybe that blowjob, Hargrove.” Steve chuckled as he nipped at Billy’s ear again before he climbed into the front. He fell into his seat with a little grunt that sent a twinge up his spine--a reminder of what they’d done.

Billy dropped his head back against the seat and let Steve play--enjoyed the way he kissed and bit along his ear. He shivered and planted his hands onto the wheel, his fingers curling tightly around the leather to keep himself grounded. If Steve didn’t stop, Billy might end up pulling over on their way back and ravishing him again. Not that Steve would complain. Billy certainly wouldn’t, but with what had happened, it was probably not a good idea to worry Joyce.

“You sore, baby?” Billy ignored the comments about pie and a blowjob. He looked over at Steve as he reversed out of the little road. There was a grin on his face, an obvious ‘I hope you aren’t,’ because Billy couldn’t promise he wouldn’t be touching Steve again before they fell asleep. He popped the BMW into drive and pulled the car out onto the main road.

It wasn’t a long drive, but it was enough that it had Billy thinking. This was good. He was happy, but he also knew that whatever the

fuck happened in the lab wasn't over. If Billy had to, even without Steve, he would get into that building and tear apart every single one of those motherfuckers. Driving became secondary as he lost himself in thought, his thumbs tapping a random beat on the wheel.

Billy wouldn't tell Steve that he was blood hungry. That he wanted to see those people die. The nurses. *Brenner*. He would kill them all and not think anything about it. His eyes drifted to Steve, but only for a moment. The road was wet and slick with snow, and he didn't want to chance wrecking.

Steve glared at Billy's amused expression along with his question as he leaned back in the chair. He was, but not as much as he expected to be. Billy had actually tended to that rather well. Steve wasn't really sure how Billy was with his other sexual partners, but it was hard to imagine Billy treating them with the same care and preparation he gave Steve. He appreciated it, really, and not just from a physical standpoint. Steve could tell that some part of Billy really liked to take care of Steve, the blonde did it often enough. Nobody really knew what he needed as much as Billy. He seemed hyper aware of everything Steve ever needed or craved, and Billy didn't hold back from giving it to him.

Steve relaxed in the seat as they drove and looked over at Billy. He was a little tense and just not fully present--it was like this often now. The lab. Billy could tell him everything that happened there and Steve still wouldn't understand. All he could do now was be there for Billy in return, protect Billy as the most precious person to him.

He gently touched Billy's forearm, slid his fingers down to Billy, and he mustered up the little bit of electricity that had regenerated inside him as Steve's hand traveled to Billy's and interlocked their fingers. He brought Billy's hand to his face and gently kissed his knuckles as he squeezed his hand. Steve knew they had a lot to worry about, to think through. Hell, they still had to get through school. But for Steve, Billy was his North Star, and for once in his life, he felt like he had a direction.

Steve somehow always found ways to pull Billy out of his thoughts, no matter how dark or vicious they became. Billy's grip had loosened immediately on the wheel when Steve's hand covered and pulled his

away. His eyes flickered to Steve again and his lips twitched into that knowing smile. Steve knew where he had gone and used his electricity, his warmth, to bring him back. He squeezed Steve's hand and looked back to the road.

29. Chapter 29

Summary for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay, we're actually quite far ahead-- I've been trying to sleep at a reasonable hour and have literally passed out before I could update. For real, I've dropped a laptop on my face. Enjoy more smut!

As the BMW rolled into Joyce's driveway, Billy untangled his fingers from Steve's to pop the car back into park. He shut the engine off and leaned back against the seat. It took energy to pretend he was okay, and he knew once he walked into that house, he'd have to start again. He ran his fingers through his hair and then dropped his arms into his lap.

Billy shifted in his seat and leaned over to press his lips to Steve's cheek. He scooted over the console and wrapped his arms around Steve's body. Not caring about who saw what, not right now, Billy hauled him close to his body and buried his face against Steve's neck. With everything that had happened, Steve was his only constant, his only foundation, and Billy was determined to never let that go.

Steve's body went pliant as Billy pulled him forward, and he smiled softly. He was getting a little used to Billy hauling him around, and though Steve wouldn't admit it, he appreciated that Billy was strong enough to do that. The position was awkward as hell, his legs dangling over the console as Steve was seated in his lap, one arm over the wheel.

He rested his chin on top of Billy's head as his arms curled around his shoulders. The Upside Down was still open. Hawkins Lab was still running. They still needed to graduate. But they were also together, really together. That was what mattered to Steve and he knew he had to make it matter the most to Billy too, keep him calm. "Did I ever tell you just how much I fucking love you?"

Steve threaded his hands gently through Billy's hair, it was getting longer for sure. He tilted the blonde's head back and grinned down at

him, “My tanned sex King from California, why, he’s also the Keg King of Hawkins, so good at basketball and school, because he can do it all!” Steve smiled impossibly wide and purposely squirmed down in Billy’s lap. “He gave *me* the fucking of a lifetime—” Steve began to pepper Billy’s face with kisses, “I think I may be ruined for any other man, it’s hard to say—”

Billy let himself relax into his seat as Steve’s fingers tangled into his hair and tipped his head back. His eyelids drooped as he watched him and his lips twitched into a smile. Honestly, this would have probably irritated the shit out of him a little less than two months ago. He would have socked Steve in the arm and told him to shut the fuck up. Now? It was endearing, but he wouldn’t tell Steve that.

Although, Steve was heading to get fucked again if he kept squirming in his lap. He grunted and laughed. He didn’t have a way to shy away from Steve’s ridiculous kisses, trapped between him and the seat. Maybe this had been a bad idea. He grinned, nonetheless, and tightened his grip around Steve’s body.

“I swear, Harrington,” Billy rumbled. He turned his face and caught Steve’s lips with his own. He pulled Steve forward and leaned up to continue the kiss, his tongue swiping over his lower lip and then invading his mouth. He slid one hand to Steve’s ass and gripped him--partly because he wanted to, partly so he didn’t sit back on the damned horn.

Steve laughed against his lips until he moaned softly, returned Billy’s kiss slowly as he began to purposely roll his hips. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know what he was doing, Steve could feel Billy underneath his ass and Steve grabbed his other hand and pushed it to his own half-hard erection.

He remembered Nancy’s words under the mistletoe, *he’ll do that all day if you let him* . Nancy was often hesitant, enjoyed shoving Steve away when it was too much. And he obliged her, even when all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around her and kiss her until she really felt it, really loved him. But what she said was probably true, Steve had a hard time denying what he wanted, maintaining control, especially when his desire was really strong. And it was never stronger than it was before Billy, and Steve suspected that Billy

wouldn't reject Steve for feeling and wanting so goddamn much. The prospect emboldened him.

Normally he hated it when Billy talked dirty to him, well, maybe not hate. It was just embarrassing as hell, even more embarrassing when it turned him on. But he found himself whispering, "Tell me the next way you want to fuck me..." Steve felt himself flush but he still arched his pelvis up once into Billy's palm before grinding his hips down harder.

They really shouldn't be doing this right in front of Joyce's house. Billy knew that, but it didn't stop him from indulging Steve, from responding. He kicked his hips up against Steve's and groaned. His palm pushed down against Steve's clothed cock, and he could tell that he was already half-hard. He licked his lips, his own arousal picking up at the idea that Steve was already ready to go again.

"Just like this," Billy murmured in response. "But without clothes. You riding me. Forcing yourself on my dick over and over," he grinned up at Steve and leaned to press a kiss just below his jaw. "Using me to make yourself feel good, yeah?" He was so tempted to open Steve's jeans up, to touch him, but here was not the damned place. He bit back a curse and leaned back against the seat.

"Y'know we can't do this here. Fucking tease," Billy huffed and pulled his hand away. There was a smirk on his lips, though, as he reached forward to pull the key out of the ignition.

Steve's breath hitched as he arched and rolled his hips between Billy's hand and his lap. His eyes were half open as he listened to him and let out a groan of frustration when Billy leaned back. Steve knew he was right, it was just incredibly hard to care, especially when he knew that's what Billy wanted.

He smirked back at Billy, "You just need to give me something to bite down on, babe—" Steve turned in the seat, awkwardly, but until he was straddling Billy and his arms slid over his shoulders, "And you can watch me..." Steve didn't care if he was teasing Billy, after everything the blonde did to him, it was practically payback. He rolled his hips hard again, maybe he could convince him to just drive off again.

There was a loud rapping knock on the window, causing Steve to jerk back and hit the horn.

Billy had been about to respond when the knock on the window jarred him. He pressed back into the seat and hissed. Fuck. Normally he was more observant than that. How had he not noticed the person walking up to the car? Steve, that's how. Asshole. Yet, when the horn went off, Billy couldn't help the small laugh. This may look terrible to someone, but damn it, Steve deserved whatever heart-stopping shit he was feeling right now. The jerk shouldn't have been working him up in Joyce's driveway, of all places. He pulled Steve forward, off of the horn, and tipped his head to look out the window.

Great. It was Hopper. Billy groaned and dropped his head on the seat. "This is *your* fault, Harrington." He told him evenly. With the key out of the ignition, he couldn't open the window. He reached for the door, instead, and pulled the handle to open it. He saw Hopper take a step back and he swung it open.

"Hey, Chief," Billy muttered.

Steve flushed bright red, still situated in Billy's lap, as Hopper tilted his head slightly and arched an eyebrow. Steve made a small noise as he slowly climbed off of Billy. He placed a hand on Billy's chest and used the balance to swing his leg out, before his foot caught, and he stumbled off of Billy instead, nearly falling onto the ground.

Hopper silently watched Steve stand to his full height, clearly embarrassed, before he looked back into the car and waited for Billy to step out. "You should head back inside, Harrington. You must be cold. A word, Hargrove?"

Steve frowned for a few seconds and glanced at Billy before he hesitantly gave a little jerk of his head. He motioned that he'd be inside, and walked back up into Joyce's house. Hopper stood there through it all and then pulled out a cigarette from his shirt front pocket and offered one to Billy.

"Cutting it a little close. Have a nice time?"

Billy had to bite his lower lip to prevent himself from chuckling at

Steve. However, when Hopper insisted that Steve go inside so he could have a word, fear rushed through him. He knew that was ridiculous. Hopper wouldn't hurt him, and fuck, if he tried? Billy could protect himself as long as he didn't freeze up. Neil had ingrained certain behaviors, and Billy wasn't sure if his new abilities had any say over them.

As soon as Billy took the cigarette, his stomach ached. He hadn't had one since before he had dropped Max off at the dance. It felt weird and *normal*, which almost made him hate it. He wasn't normal anymore. Granted, what the fuck was normal, anyway? He slid the cigarette between his lips, and once Hopper was done lighting his own cigarette, Billy took the offered lighter and started his own.

The first suck in was harsh and Billy almost coughed. His eyes watered, but it felt good to have the smoke fill his lungs again. He exhaled and stepped away from the car. The door shut with a click and he leaned back.

"You can blame Harrington for that," Billy smirked and looked up at the sky. He was avoiding Hopper's eyes. "And yeah... it was... nice." He held the cigarette between his fingers and was mildly surprised that he didn't feel the need to take another drag. Not yet, anyway.

"Mmm, I bet." Hopper wryly said, it wasn't like he wasn't a teenager once. He stood there and took in Billy for a moment. He seemed more relaxed than he typically was in the cabin, especially around him. Hopper got it, truly got it. Anybody who reminded him even remotely of his father would have made Hop pissed off or hurt, too.

"Listen kid, I'm not great at this shit, you're not great at this shit, so I'm not going to kid myself in any way. But I know you're working on whatever you need to work through and you're a—" Hopper stopped and swallowed, knew Billy's eyes were on him intently. It was hard for him to act like he cared, hard to imagine doing this on an older kid. In some ways, El was easier, still more vulnerable enough and less jaded than an older kid.

So, instead, he took Billy's free hand by the wrist and held it flat, not gently but there was no pain as he pressed a small set of keys into his palm. "It was impounded outside of Chicago, but nobody got inside.

Figured it's your car and I would have wanted it back when I was your age." Hopper took a deep drag of his cigarette and looked back towards Joyce's house. The ability to have freedom, some form of freedom, was always important.

Billy had listened quietly. He knew how to keep his mouth shut, how to not interrupt someone while they were talking. Despite the fact that Neil was dead--had they even had a funeral?--he still seemed to haunt him. He could only wonder how long he would have to deal with it. His fingers tightened around the cigarette. At least, until Hopper took his wrist. He sucked in a sharp breath and almost pulled back, his heart making a damned racket against his chest.

Then, the familiar keys were pressed into the palm of his hand and Billy was frozen to the spot. He stared at them, his jaw becoming slack as waves of shock rolled over him. Hopper had...? He curled his fingers over the keys as tears stung his eyes. His car...? His eyes flickered up to Hopper again, and it would seem that the sheriff had completely dumbfounded him.

"I..."

Hopper clapped a hand on his shoulder. "You're new to the Party, that's what the brats call this, but you're a member. It's back up at the cabin now, so whenever you two make your way back, she's waiting for you, kid. And I wouldn't hear the end of it if one of El's big brothers didn't see her on a regular basis, so you're doing me a favor."

Hopper watched the curtains flutter from the living room and gave a little smirk. He leaned forward conspiratorially, and spoke low to Billy. "Little pro-tip with those types. A little guilt will always give you the upper hand. Just say I yelled at you and let him dangle a moment. Always worth it." He squeezed Billy's shoulder. It lingered there for a moment, even though Hopper said nothing else. He already knew his and Joyce's role in all this, for some of them more than others. Hopper knew El was already sleeping in his car and after a thought, he leaned in and briefly embraced Billy in a fierce hug.

He didn't expect the kid to say anything, and it was over as quickly as he initiated contact before he pulled away. "Merry Christmas, kid."

Hopper walked towards his SUV, with a little wave over his shoulder, before he got in, started the truck, and drove off.

“The Party...” Billy remembered playing the game with them. He remembered keeping Steve’s character alive and trying not to laugh whenever Dustin threw jabs at Steve about how *Billy of all people* could keep him alive, but Steve couldn’t. Lucas had been weary for a while, but had slowly warmed up to him. He was sure it was because of Max. Mike was only okay with him because El liked him. Will? Will had been giving him looks ever since he came back from the lab. He was quiet enough that Billy had no idea how the kid felt about him. He was more of an observer than a talker. Creepy.

The hug pulled Billy out of his thoughts and his whole body went rigid. He dropped the cigarette out of the hand that didn’t have the keys and held his breath until Hopper let go. It wasn’t until the lights of the truck disappeared that his thoughts started to move again, and even then, he struggled to think.

The Camaro, his baby, was sitting at Hopper’s. He would be able to get her. Drive her again. He gripped the keys and reached up to wipe at his eyes. Fuck. Even if he wanted to, right now there was no way he could guilt trip Steve, even for a moment. No, he was too caught up in ‘what the *fuck* ’ and ‘oh god, I have my car again.’

Billy stood there for a few minutes to just calm down before heading toward the front door.

Steve quickly stood up from the couch and looked over at Billy, “Is everything okay?” He chewed at his lower lip, worrying it between his teeth as Steve looked Billy up and down. Everybody else was already in bed, but the house still smelled wonderful, like it had earlier in the evening from all the cooking. Only the lights of the Christmas tree remained on, colorful and twinkling, making their own soft glow that illuminated the living room.

Steve quickly strode over to him and took Billy’s hand, his already large eyes wide in concern. “Hey, talk to me.” Billy was one of them now, with Steve and Max and in this strange sort of family they also just called The Party. If it was just knowing the secrets, knowing about the Upside-Down, nobody would have done any of this,

interacted with Billy like this. But he was there for the holiday, tentatively cared for and kept safe, *because* people cared. Steve reached out and cupped his cheek, stepped in close to Billy's space. His thumb gently moved over the curve of his cheek, against the stubble there.

"What did he need to talk to you about?"

Billy hadn't even slid the door closed and Steve was already in front of him. He smiled as the door clicked shut. He remembered what Nancy said about letting Steve do this--touch however much he wanted--and he didn't mind. If Steve wanted to touch him all day, he'd let him. His gaze flickered over the house briefly before falling to Steve.

"You know how you asked about how I'm gonna fuck you next?" Billy asked, his voice low. "It's not next, but Steve, I'm going to take you apart in my Camaro." He opened his palm to show Steve the keys in his palm. His lips spread into a giant grin and his eyes positively *glittered*. He wrapped an arm around Steve's waist and hauled him up against his chest. His lips found Steve's and he was kissing him eagerly, excitedly, because he *had his car* and he had *Steve* and those were the two best things that he had since his mom was alive.

Steve let out a soft, surprised noise when Billy grabbed and pulled him in, his mind trying to catch up that everything was fine, Billy had his car, and then Billy was *kissing* him. He smiled against his lips before he parted them for Billy, a quiet moan escaping when he wrapped his arms around the blonde's neck.

He pulled Billy in close as well, nipped his lower lip, as he warmly breathed across his lips, "Your car is even smaller. You're going to have to be really creative, babe..." A warm smile spread across his lips. He wasn't really sure how Hopper managed to find the Camaro, but Steve might thank him personally just to see Billy like this. One of his hands traveled down the back of Billy's shirt at the collar. Small sparks tingled at Billy's neck and back as Steve pressed flush against him.

"I'll figure it out," Billy muttered against Steve's lips. He sighed as the warmth of Steve's electricity bounced off his neck and down his

spine. "Drop the passenger seat back and have you ride me, yeah? Shit, it doesn't even have to be in the cabin. I'll just fuck you over the hood." Obviously, Billy was distracted too much to think about the lab. The darkness that usually haunted him, that sat behind his eyes, was temporarily gone.

The idea of having fun with Steve was appealing, but the guy was *loud*. There was no way they could have sex in the house without everyone knowing. He pressed his lips to Steve's cheek and pushed the keys into his pocket. "I'd pick you up and carry you to the room if I didn't think you'd make me drop you." He pinched Steve's side and stepped back.

"Bed, Steve?" Billy reached down and squeezed his hand. "Oh, shit. Wait. You wanted pie. Right."

Steve flushed bright red and grabbed Billy, his mind racing with everything that Billy said. "I want *you*, Billy." Steve didn't really care how they had to do it, but there was no way he was going to be able to wait until the next time they were alone. There was no alone on a regular basis that was enough for Steve.

He hadn't expected Nancy to want to sleep with him that first night. He expected having to work a lot harder to get into her pants. But Nancy knew what she wanted, and she knew when it was too much, when Steve was too much. He searched Billy's gaze, it had been too long for Steve. Nancy and him falling apart long before Halloween. His voice was soft, but thick with need, "You don't know what you do to me. How you make me..." His other hand slipped up under Billy's shirt, found one of the scars and he absently traced it with his thumb, his nail circling there slowly as Steve pressed his forehead to Billy's.

"It was bad before, because you're *so* fucking hot and you're *you*, but since we came back from the lab..." Steve's eyes closed and he tried to think of the way he could describe the way he felt. He nuzzled his forehead to Billy's. "It's like I'm a generator. Like my blood and veins feel like a generator, and it's just always fucking buzzing and humming, and it was so quiet in the car for the first time...." Steve shook his head a little, sighed, felt a little stupid for not explaining this well enough. "It's never going to be like that with anybody else,

and it's never felt that way before." Steve bit his lower lip, his eyes still closed, and he whispered, "It's not just what I can do, it's that *you* make me spark like lightning, all over, until I wanna explode..."

As soon as Steve's fingers touched along his scar, he twitched and almost stepped back. His scars were still a part of him that he didn't like, that he felt self-conscious about. At least Steve was helping him work on that, even if it was through tiny touches and smooth words. Speaking of, Steve talking pulled him away from the scar and back to the present. His eyes settled on Steve as he spoke and his body felt as if it was lighting up.

"I-Steve..." Billy trailed off and worked his jaw. He wished he could explain his own emotions and the heat that washed over him whenever Steve was near. It was hard, though, and he stood almost awkwardly. "I'm sorry I can't... I can't put into words how..." He reached up and slid his fingers through Steve's hair, pushing it up and away from his face. He was smiling, at least, even if he couldn't come up with the right words. "But I do... I *do* want you. I always do. Only you."

Steve softly laughed and pressed close to him. "I just...I know I can be...well, Nance wasn't wrong. It's just so different with you and I can't...hold back well." What they did in the car was just so amazing and even though he anticipated it being different with Billy, that was *otherworldly*. At least he thought so. Steve glanced at Billy. "Don't take this the wrong way but...it was *different* for you too, right?" Part of him wondered if it was just different having sex with a guy, it had to be at least somewhat different. But the whole experience, it was beyond intimate for Steve. He had that, he loved that, but what he had with Billy was more.

He turned his head, kissed the inside of Billy's arm. Steve knew communicating was hard for the blonde, but Steve needed to know. He lifted his eyes to look into Billy's, his fingers still gently moving on Billy's stomach, his index finger sliding down to just barely under the belt of Billy's jeans and delicately pulling him forward. "Am I going crazy..?"

Billy's mouth went dry as Steve spoke about it being *different*. Oh, he understood. He knew *exactly* what Steve was talking about. That

wasn't in question, but how the fuck was he supposed to put it in words. Even as Billy kissed his arm and tugged him forward by his belt, he was at a loss for words. He stared at Steve, his heart beginning to pound against his chest. He had said that he loved him plenty of times (at least, for him). He had held him and they had comforted each other after their perspective freak outs.

But what they had done? It hadn't been sex, and Billy knew that. It was so far from just sex that he wasn't sure that '*making love*' would actually cover it. Something had happened. Between Steve's ability to play with electricity and Billy's own thrum of power, it had been... been like they had become *one* . Not two separate entities. The idea had heat spreading over Billy's cheeks.

"You're not going crazy, sweetheart," Billy murmured. "It wasn't... just sex, is what you're getting at." God, why couldn't he just say it? He ran his tongue over his lower lip as his nerves twisted. "We were... It was more than that. Damn, Steve. It was more than--than making love." His voice became soft--quiet enough that if there had been any background noise, Steve wouldn't have been able to hear him. "I felt... whole."

But Steve smiled widely, his hand slid around Billy's waist and brought him close. His eyes watered for a moment and he laughed, setting his hand on the small of his back. "I felt the same--I didn't wanna say and freak you out..." Steve kissed him softly, smiling against his lips before he deepened it by arching his body and parting his lips. Steve felt such incredible relief, especially since Billy had such a hard time saying anything like that.

"I won't say anything again--right after this-- *magical* --!" Steve smiled wider, laughing at the absurdity of it, and pulled Billy forward until they both fell into the couch. Steve knew that of the two of them, he was the more overt affectionate one, but Billy had his own way of doing things. His touch, the pet names, the way he tried to take care of Steve; Steve felt that so strongly that it was strange for him to see people just assume Billy was an asshole, even if it was what he showed off to the world. Even if it was what Steve himself thought not that long ago.

Billy offered Steve another small smile. It was true--Billy had a

tendency to freak out about things, especially when it came to love and all that other mushy shit. After the lab, though? It was easier to tell Steve he loved him. Maybe it was actually his fear of not being able to, as if some day he'd be taken again or something would happen and he wouldn't be able to say it again. Steve didn't fall asleep without Billy murmuring it against his lips. He didn't wake up and start his day without Billy cupping his cheeks and pressing a kiss to his lips, those words tumbling out of his mouth.

The idea of dying, or feeling like he was going to die, had changed a lot for Billy.

Luckily, Billy was able to catch himself on the couch before crushing Steve. He grabbed the back cushion and the side, hovering over Steve with a soft laugh. He closed his lips quickly, though, because they weren't fucking alone. Damn it, *Steve*. Instead of berating the other teen, he leaned down to seal his lips over Steve's. "What're you doing?" He murmured against his lips. "What's going on in that head of yours, Harrington?"

Steve chuckled and grinned against his lips, "That there has to be *something* I can just bite down on and I promise I'll be quiet... *something* I can do to convince you...." Steve arched up slightly and ran his inner thigh against Billy's hip, just like he did in the car, before he slung a leg over his ass. "I haven't told you this Hargrove, but I have amazing ninja skills, like a thief in the night."

Truthfully, Steve knew if this actually was successful, he was going to have to bit down really fucking hard on something, but it might not be enough so that they wouldn't be discovered. He knew he was the problem, not Billy. His hand slid against Billy's neck, the electricity gently dancing there and crackling around Billy's pulse point before Steve turned the blonde's neck and begin to mouth and suck at the same spot he just touched.

I felt whole, that's what Billy said, and Steve wanted to give him that as many times as he possibly could. It hadn't exactly been Steve's first time feeling that way, feeling love, but for Billy, all of this was new, and Steve wanted him to feel nothing but belonging and love for the first time in his life.

Billy breathed in sharply through his nose as Steve's energy slid over his pulse point and his skin. He licked his lips and dug his fingers into the kiss once the energy was replaced by Steve's mouth. Fuck. He shuddered and shifted on the couch. "First, we are not doing anything out here," Billy rumbled. "Second, there's no way you can be quiet, Steve. Not if I'm inside of you. That isn't happening."

It was obvious that Billy wanted to, though. As soon as Steve's leg was around his waist and tugging him forward, the thickness of his cock pressed against Steve's thigh. He grit his teeth and then chuckled, amused by the entire thing. "So, give me another option *after* we go to our room." Thank god for Joyce having a room that they could crash in.

Steve fell back onto the couch with a low whine, his brow furrowed a moment. He wasn't about to tell Billy how what he wanted was that feeling again, not just to be so close to Billy, but to have him *physically* inside Steve--he was surprised himself that he wanted it so badly. He could get off with Billy, and he liked that too, it was just not exactly his ideal now. At the same time, he was aware that Billy was being the rational one here. The last thing he needed was Byers busting down the door to see him taking it in the ass.

He was pouting, he *knew* he was pouting, and Billy just looked down at him, incredibly amused. The blonde didn't even say anything before Steve lightly hit his arm with a scowl and a little huff of displeasure. "Shut the fuck up, asshole." He wasn't going to be able to change Billy's mind, that much was clear. His leg was still around Billy's waist, but he folded his arms across his chest, thinking about what he could even get Billy to do.

Billy almost laughed, but snorted instead. He put most of his weight on one arm so he could reach down and stroke his fingers over Steve's cheek. "I'm sorry, babe," he murmured, and he sounded sincere, at least. "Once we make sure your house is safe, you can be as loud as you like. You can scream until you can't scream anymore. But you know you're too loud for this place." He slid his fingers down to Steve's jaw and forced him to tip his head up. "Don't give me that look. Come on now."

It was actually pretty damned cute--Steve pouting about this. It made

Billy's heart flutter and his stomach clench. Oh, he'd fuck Steve if he could. That wasn't the issue here. He was just too damned loud. Billy leaned down and pressed his lips over Steve's again. "Just give me something else we can do, Steve. I'll do anything else. Just stop pouting at me."

Steve suddenly realized that Billy didn't like it when he did that, didn't like even the *idea* that Steve was upset. He truly wasn't upset, if anything Billy was entirely in the right, Steve just wanted what he wanted. But the *idea* that Billy would do anything to make him stop gave Steve a small sense of power, and he turned his head quickly out of Billy's grasp, petulant. He looked towards the tree and kept pouting, even as Billy coaxed his head back in place. It was only a few seconds before Steve broke, grinning widely, even as he refused to fully look at Billy. He was going to have to work on that, that could come in handy later.

Steve was going to be severely limited with his options in this house. Billy riled him up, even without meaning to. If they focused on Steve at all, they were going to have to deal with the risk of somebody catching them. But if the focus was on Billy...Steve immediately stopped teasing Billy and cast a look back in the blonde's direction. "Okay. Up, I know what I want." Steve gently patted his side, rubbed his hand gently across Billy's ribs.

Billy seemed to relax when Steve grinned. He pressed another kiss to his lips and then nodded when Steve told him to get up. Reluctantly, Billy pushed himself up from the couch, sliding out of Steve's grasp. He immediately missed the heat, the contact, but given the look in Steve's eyes, he had some sort of plan.

"Come on," Billy offered Steve a hand and smiled. He wanted to go to the room, anyway considering the tightness in his jeans. He still had reservations about being naked in front of Steve with all of his scarring, but that was getting better with consistent exposure and Steve's hands and mouth.

Steve took some delight in knowing what he wanted and leaving Billy in the dark. The blonde was always so cocky and sure of himself, and some part of Steve always wanted to be that way. He faked it as best he could as King Steve, but it was never as smooth, never as sincere.

Steve didn't care so much about faking it now, but it wasn't fake for Billy. And now with Billy feeling unsure of himself, even slightly, all Steve wanted was to put him back together again, give Billy that edge that Steve was sure Billy missed.

So Steve took his hand but made sure to walk ahead of him as he held it, felt Billy's eyes drift on his backside. And when they were in the room, Steve locked the door, let his hand drop, and stepped away from him. When Billy tried to move in, Steve raised his hands up and bent down just a little before he patted the edge of the bed for Billy. Steve knelt down on the floor and placed his hands on his knees. He was fully dressed before he casually said to Billy, "Oh, I want you to strip."

Billy almost faltered over his own feet after Steve knelt on the ground. With the door locked, he knew Steve was up to something. He just wasn't sure what. He was curious, of course, and fuck was he aroused. His cock ached behind his pants and his mouth felt dry. Shit. It was strange to have Steve talk to him with such finality--like he knew exactly what he wanted--and that alone made Billy's body twitch.

During his week in the lab, he had no control. None. Before then, it was all about control outside of Neil. Now? The idea of Steve simply taking over, letting him just follow? It was... it was *good*. Billy was okay with it because he *trusted* Steve. He nodded, not trusting his voice, and pulled his hoodie up and over his head. He took his tennis shoes off next and then his jeans and socks.

"Am I allowed to know what you're doing?" Billy asked, but there was a definite note of teasing in his voice as he settled on the edge of the bed.

Steve reached out and ran his hands up and down Billy's thighs, just as he did in the car. He peered up at Billy, at his body. He hadn't been lying when he told Billy it was beautiful, no scarring would ever change that, but Steve hoped it would fade in time for Billy's sake. His voice was soft, a little teasing as well since they were here since Steve couldn't shut the hell up. "I want to do what you did to me, that time in the shower...." Steve tilted his head to the side, a flush rising slowly on his cheeks, "And I want you to talk to me, tell me

everything you thought about doing to me since the first time you saw me at the party, that now we *can* do...and then I want you to come in my mouth when I get off, too.”

Steve bit his lower lip and swallowed, he felt like it was a tall order, and a little dirty. Steve was certainly flushed, in both embarrassment and excitement. He was sure Billy could easily come up with worse things, filthy things, but that was the fun of it. Steve wasn't Billy, and these things were small thoughts and desires that guys joked about privately, Billy just happened to be far more skilled in actually getting it to happen to him.

“Does that sound okay?” Steve lifted his gaze, meeting Billy's as he pressed his energy down on his thighs, harder than usual, *needy* .

Billy's jaw fell slack, his eyes popping wide as Steve spoke to him. He seemed completely thrown off, surprised, his lips parting and then closing. The blush that began to spread over his cheeks spread to his neck. Oh, fuck. He swallowed and felt a wash of heat roll over his body. He would never admit to Steve that he had never had that done to him--he had never experienced that before. He had done it to Steve, sure, and a few others. But he had never let himself be that vulnerable.

But the idea of having Steve do it to him? His cock twitched and his thighs tensed below Steve's fingers. His breath caught in his throat as that stinging warmth rolled from Steve's hands and into his bloodstream. It forced his thighs to part, his hands falling to clutch the sheets.

“Fuck, Steve,” Billy reached out and slid his fingers through Steve's hair. “Yeah-yeah, I can...I can do that. It sounds great.” He almost choked on the word because god *damn* . Steve was normally so tentative and eager, but this was a notch above what Billy was used to. “How... how do you want me...?”

He could tell Steve everything he had thought about doing to him if he could fucking think straight while Steve touched him. That was probably going to be the biggest hurdle.

Steve hid a smile while he chewed his lower lip. He hadn't been fully

sure that Billy would agree to it. Billy didn't like having control--Billy *needed* it--and Steve understood that. He didn't have any problem relinquishing all his control in the moment, so long as they both enjoyed themselves. Billy might have trusted Steve, but the blonde's body was still learning, and Steve was willing to show him time and again until Billy was ready for more.

He crawled forward a little and pushed Billy's legs apart for him to kneel between them. "I think just...with my mouth at first, and then lay back when you're ready..." Steve's voice was quiet, his cheeks still red as he spoke above a whisper, "I really like having you in my mouth...." And with that, he gently gripped Billy and parted his lips to take the head in. This sort of thing was difficult for Steve to voice when the tables were turned, and Billy loved to do it to him. But Steve was going to at least give him that, since it was some part of himself Steve never expected.

Billy's hand tightened in Steve's hair as the warmth of his mouth slid over his cock. He held his breath, reveling in the way Steve's cheeks painted red and how his lips stretched over him. When he finally exhaled, his muscles relaxed and he allowed himself to let go, to simply feel. He kept the normal buzz of thought pushed away and stroked the tips of his fingers over Steve's scalp. "This is one of the things I thought about," He murmured, his voice breathy and deep, laced with *want* .

"I thought about--about kissing you. How soft your lips are. How hot your mouth would be," Billy licked his lips and gently tugged Steve's hair. Not enough to hurt, but enough to emphasize what he was saying. "I thought about your hands. How they'd feel on me. How you would move underneath me. Shit, Steve..." He rocked his hips a little and curled his other hand tightly in the sheets.

Steve moved one of his hands away and slid it up the plane of Billy's stomach to gently rake his nails down as he sucked. He flicked his gaze up at Billy and moved his lips slowly and deliberately. Billy liked to watch him, and Steve was going to make sure to give him a show. When the blonde moved his hips forward, Steve did his best to relax around him to accommodate his length.

When he was younger, Steve had an errant thought or two about

guys. He just assumed everybody did, that it was normal. Liking girls made things easy, especially publically. Privately, however, Steve buried his thoughts deeply, even from himself, and they only surfaced at odd moments, easily dismissed. But it was different with Billy, even after that first drunken night. Steve couldn't *stop* those thoughts, couldn't stop wondering what this or that was like with a guy. It felt so different with Billy, not just the blonde's muscular body, but how he interacted with Steve, how he cared for and pushed him around. Steve was used to chasing after girls, but that somebody found him, of all people, so desirable? He wouldn't have believed it but for the ferocity that Billy spoke with, because Billy was never going to lie to him like that. And it was a major turn on.

Steve moaned around him quietly, allowed Billy to feel the soft hum of pleasure of his mouth. He never imagined wanting something like this, a guy like this, and before Billy, thoughts would have remained thoughts. Billy changed everything. Steve closed his eyes and tried to concentrate as he slowly took more of Billy's length into his mouth with a soft whine. When he came close to his limit, Steve's brow was furrowed and he couldn't help digging his fingers hard into Billy's hips in order to try to push himself farther than he had taken the blonde before.

Words seem to be becoming hard for Billy. He gasped as Steve's hot mouth moved over him, sliding down as far as he could handle. Pleasure spiked through his gut and wormed its way into his veins, lighting up his body. He tightened his grip in Steve's hair, not pulling or pushing, but simply holding. Billy was careful not to push, not to hurt him. Always careful.

"Okay, babe. Let me... let me move back, yeah?" Billy didn't want to admit how nervous he was about this. He wanted it-- *fuck* , he wanted it. But he also knew that this would be a new experience, one that he hadn't explored with any of his previous partners. He could with Steve, though. He moved his fingers from Steve's hair to his cheek and gently eased him up.

Before moving, Billy pulled Steve up enough that, when he leaned down, he could press their mouths together. He slid his tongue over Steve's lower lip and then tugged the soft skin with his teeth. When he was done kissing Steve (he was never actually done doing that),

Billy broke the kiss and scooted back onto the bed.

Billy didn't stay on his back, though. He glanced at Steve, eyes half-lidded and a smirk curled on his face, before he turned over onto his knees. He didn't stay on his hands, though, sinking down onto his elbows, instead. Like this, he was completely splayed out for Steve and *vulnerable*. The word kept banging around in his head, but there was definitely a part of him that wondered what this looked like for Steve, if he liked it, if he was as pretty as Steve was on his knees.

"Is this okay?" Billy murmured. He sounded uncertain and he hated it, but maybe this would help him feel *okay* with his body. Steve's drove him insane, but he couldn't... see him doing that to Steve. Maybe before, when he hadn't wasted some of his muscle away or when his skin was littered with scars.

Steve nodded quickly before he remembered that Billy couldn't see him, "Yeah, yeah, that's nice..." He licked his lips and moved behind Billy, wrapped an arm around his waist and hungrily kissed as his shoulders and back. Steve pressed his own clothed erection to Billy's ass when he closed his eyes and sucked hard at the nape of Billy's neck.

He was moving slowly, arching his hips like he wanted to against Billy, to feel some sort of friction, to feel him, to be as close to Billy as possible. Billy was able to feel him, feel what Billy *did* to him. Steve moaned quietly as his mouth dragged along Billy's spine, nipping and kissing vertebrae.

His hand slid in front to Billy's cock and he stroked him several times as he panted against the blonde's skin. "You're so sexy, Billy, I always want you so much..." Steve sucked hard on Billy's side, his other hand moved to Billy's ass when he squeezed an ass cheek hard. Steve burned a trail of kisses even lower until he was so close to where he needed to be, but Steve kept squeezing his ass before kissing and *biting* his other cheek softly. Steve could get drunk on tasting Billy, letting Billy have pleasure.

Billy curled his fingers into the sheets and dropped his head so his forehead pressed into the bed. He sucked in a breath as Steve's cock pressed against his ass. The only thing that separated them were his

jeans, and it sort of made Billy dizzy. He closed his eyes and concentrated on how Steve's mouth felt over his shoulder, his back, his side. His body twitched at random, but they were small movements, barely noticeable unless Steve was looking.

"Steve..." Billy whispered his name, his voice breathy. Once Steve bit his ass, though, he made an almost undignified noise in the back of his throat. He pulled forward and then laughed quietly. "Jackass," he muttered. His muscles tensed as he thought about what Steve was about to do. Would Steve even like doing that? Would he be *okay* doing something so filthy? Billy's cheeks burned and he was glad his face was almost buried into the bed at this point. It muffled his moan as Steve began to stroke him and his hips stuttered forward into his hand. His grip tightened in the sheets.

Part of Billy's nervousness was obviously having Steve touching so much of him. Normally, their roles were switched and he was the one canvassing Steve's body, mapping out every dip and ridge.

But Steve wasn't deterred, kissing and softly sucking at the flesh presented to him, one hand sliding up to the small of Billy's back and letting Billy feel at the base of his spine the thrum that Steve felt coursing through his own body. Steve had never done anything like this before, but the idea of tasting Billy on such an intimate level made his cock pulse in his jeans.

He used his hands to gently and slowly pull Billy apart, and he murmured, "Just let me know if you want me to stop..." Steve knew this was intense for Billy, recalled Billy's words the last time he touched the blonde that anytime he did something like this it was a big deal for him. Steve tried to remember exactly what Billy had done for him, but they were different people and Steve would touch Billy in his own way.

Steve leaned in and planted soft kisses from the base of Billy's spine until he was at his parted cheeks. He kissed inside Billy slowly, allowed him to become used to the sensation before he pressed the flat of his tongue against the puckered skin there.

Billy's muscles seemed to relax as Steve's little shock waves of energy rolled along his spine. He closed his eyes and exhaled shakily. This

was okay. He was vulnerable, spread open for Steve, but he was okay. Steve wouldn't hurt him. Fuck, he couldn't even imagine that. Billy furrowed his brow and then all thought seemed to fall off a cliff as he felt Steve's warm tongue slide over him. His back arched and his breath hitched in surprise.

After forcing his jaw to stop clenching, Billy tipped his head to the side so his cheek was resting on one of his forearms. "Feels good..." He admitted, and oh god he felt fucking *shy* now. He dug his fingers into the sheets and pressed his lips together.

Leave it to Steve to make him feel like this--new and surprised and *good*. He darted his tongue out across his lips and inched his knees further apart for Steve.

Steve dragged his tongue in long strokes, turned his head ever so slightly to gently nip inside Billy's skin there, and Billy felt the soft pressure of his teeth and lips. It was slower than Billy had done it, but no less passionate, more reverent than anything else. It was how Steve treated Billy's body, which was so used to hurt and pain and not an ounce of tenderness.

He slid one hand gently up and down Billy's right cheek, the power in Steve's body and his fingertips soft and teasing, delicate, before Steve dragged his tongue further down. Steve felt a little emboldened by the hitch of Billy's breath, his quiet words, and he was going to make damn sure after their experience in the car that showed Billy that he wasn't entirely incompetent to initiate things either.

Steve took one of Billy's balls in his mouth and sucked hard then, his own heart beginning to race quicker as released it with a soft, wet pop before he took the other in his mouth. Steve always enjoyed pleasing other people, making them happy in whatever way he could, and Billy was at Steve's apex for giving pleasure, hesitant, but so deserving.

Billy really should have thought about this before doing it because he could feel the whimper crawling into his throat. He was afraid he'd make noise, that *he'd* be the one they'd have to worry about. Luckily, he was about to muffle the noise by biting down on his own knuckles. He breathed heavily through his nose and fought the urge

to rock his hips back as Steve's tongue continued to move over him. The little, gentle bites made him twitch and gasp.

"Oh, *fuck* ..." Billy choked, letting go of his hand as Steve began to suck on him. His eyes widened and then snapped shut. "Steve, *baby* ..." He wanted more, needed it, and he had no idea how to ask for it. How to put what he wanted into words. He just wanted *Steve* and there were no words for that.

Steve pulled off him slowly and panted heavily in excitement. He knew Billy could hear his own voice tremble, "You're so sexy, Billy, I just want to taste you..." Both of his hands squeezed Billy's ass, kneading there when he parted Billy again and pushed his face forward. Steve held onto Billy firmly as his tongue pressed inside Billy slowly, his nose grazing just above Billy's hole, almost nuzzling when Steve pushed his tongue as far as he could.

His blunt nails dug into Billy's ass and when Billy began to writhe and squirm, Steve quickly wrapped both of his arms around Billy's muscular thighs to *hold* him there. Steve had his own strength, not as intense as Billy's maybe, but he held Billy there easily and firmly as he curled his tongue inside him.

Billy's brain felt like it short-circuited as Steve's tongue dipped inside of his body. He arched his back, his spine bowing so that his chest pressed against the bed. His lips parted in a gasp and he stifled his next moan. Words fell passed his lips, but he wasn't even sure what they were. Hell, he hadn't realized he was squirming until Steve's arm anchored him in place while he continued to lick into his body.

"Steve--Steve *please* ..." Billy twisted the sheets in his fists and rocked his body back, essentially begging. "I need--I need more." He wasn't even sure what *more* meant. All he knew was that Steve's tongue was driving him crazy and he was aching, his cock heavy between his thighs.

Steve removed one arm from around Billy's thigh and pulled back a little. He turned his head and bit at the flesh of Billy's ass, a little sharper than before, which included the moan Steve couldn't stop himself from emitting. Steve was painfully hard in his jeans, watching and tasting Billy made him tremble a little, his voice

rasping a little. "Like this...?"

He reached up and used two fingers to gently drag back and forth against Billy's parted cheeks before he teased the puckered hole, pressing against it but not inside. "Can I please touch you like this too, please...?" Steve placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to one cheek before he sucked fiercely. The mark that he left was gone seconds later, but Billy could still feel it, feel how unafraid Steve was to touch him. "If you're close, you can be back in my mouth...Billy..." He bit again at Billy's left cheek, holding the flesh between his teeth firmly before releasing it slowly.

"Yes, yes," Billy hissed as Steve bit him, but he didn't *care*. As soon as Steve's fingers were brushing over him, teasing over his hole, he choked on a low moan and nodded his head. "B-both. Yes to both." He wanted Steve's fingers inside of him. Maybe that was the *more* he had been asking for--a bigger stretch, more of Steve inside of him. Combined with the idea of coming down Steve's throat? His cock twitched and his thigh muscles tensed.

"Should--should I move? Is this okay?" He was asking that again because he wasn't sure how Steve wanted to do this. Yes, Billy wanted Steve's fingers inside of him. He also wanted to be in his mouth, and *fuck* he almost came just thinking about having both of those at once.

Steve groaned, just a little too loud, and he had to exhale, fucking try to calm down since he was getting too worked up himself. He loved to feel wanted by Billy, needed by Billy just as much as he needed the blonde. It was just a careful balance, one that Steve felt he navigated well.

He pressed the tips of his fingers in, slow and gentle, as he closed his eyes a moment. "You tell me what you want King Billy, you tell me and I'll do it, move however you want, babe..." Steve licked his lips and fought the urge to touch himself, even as he got closer to the edge himself every time he heard Billy make a new noise the blonde had never made before. Steve might have to beg Billy to get him off after as he held on, and when he felt his resolve slip for even a moment, Steve turned and sucked *hard* on Billy's cheek.

“Fuck,” Billy clenched his jaw as Steve sucked on his skin, and even though he healed immediately, he was sure it was a damned good mark. He let his jaw fall slack again and he shuddered. “I want to be on my back. I want to watch you.” He mumbled the last part. Sure, he could talk dirty to Steve about fucking him, about taking him slow or hard or fast. But this was entirely different, and his skin burned with both arousal and embarrassment.

It wasn't difficult to change his position, and Billy realized that he liked being able to look down at Steve, to watch him as he sat back on his elbows and spread his legs. His eyes were intent on Steve, the blue almost completely blown out by his pupils. “I love you,” he murmured and then snapped his mouth shut. It sort of happened before he could stop it and he grinned sheepishly at Steve.

Steve laughed softly, his own cheeks flushed as he wet his fingers with his own mouth. He leaned up a little and took the time to slowly push his fingers forward inside Billy. He bit his lower lip as his large eyes darted over Billy's body and face, watching him intently for several long moments before he bent down, kissing and sucking on Billy's inner thighs. Steve left a mark there similar to the one on Billy's ass, and when he watched it vanish, he dragged his tongue there, sucking softer then.

He reached out, almost hesitant, before he took Billy's hand. Steve kissed the inside of his wrist softly before he moved Billy's hand into his own hair. Steve swallowed softly, knowing he probably didn't need to ask what he wanted. He curled his fingers inside Billy before he slid one arm under the blonde's thigh and held him again as he took Billy back in his mouth. Steve groaned around him and closed this eyes. There was just something about being able to taste Billy so strongly that appealed to him. His own cock twitched and his brow furrowed when Steve whimpering softly around him, slowly curling and uncurling his fingers.

Billy held his breath as he felt Steve's fingers slowly press into his body. His hips rolled for a moment, taking in more of what Steve had to offer. His breath left him in a harsh exhale, but his lips quirked into a small grin as Steve guided his hand to his hair. He stroked his fingers through the brown strands and then drug his fingertips over his scalp.

It was almost overwhelming to have Steve's fingers inside of him and his mouth on his cock. Billy could feel that coiling in his lower spine, that warming heat and shots of pleasure running through his limbs as Steve moved his mouth over his cock. He had to fight to keep his eyes open, to continue watching him. It also didn't escape him how his stomach clenched and his hips tried to roll. He kept stopping himself, though, not wanting to gag Steve on his cock, despite the fact that he wanted Steve's fingers deeper.

"Steve," Billy tugged gently at his hair and purposefully clenched his muscles around his fingers. "More...?" He just needed something *more* . More stretch, more pull, more *something* . His body was teetering the line between his orgasm and *not* and he was struggling to even think at this point.

Steve's own stomach clenched at the request and he whined on Billy's cock. Steve was incredibly hard, but he was well aware that Billy probably wasn't ready to be on the receiving end of things, and even if he was, they would be back to the same problem they had before. But that didn't mean that he wasn't going to oblige him, even as he ground his own hips into the mattress, getting increasingly desperate for some friction, for the ability to at least touch himself.

He gently pulled out his fingers then, and Steve hoped it didn't hurt Billy as he moved them back inside Billy slowly, this time adding a third. Steve was very careful to work them inside the blonde, held the cock in his mouth as he felt it twitch on his tongue in excitement. Once his fingers were inside Billy, he didn't slowly curl them as he did previously, he began moving them back and forth, just like he would if he was inside Billy. Only when his fingers were fully inside Billy did he curl them, seeking out that bundle of nerves, as he took Billy deeply in his mouth. Steve's eyes watered and he closed them tightly as he groaned around his length, his mouth salivating from the exertion.

As soon as Steve added a third finger, Billy *knew* that's what he had been asking for. The burn lit him up even if his body immediately began to try to dim it. He fought against it, though, and gasped as the burn came back and his jaw clamped down to muffle his moan. He hiked his hips up, babbling out an apology because fuck, he probably gagged Steve.

Billy's fingers tightened in Steve's hair as the coil in his gut suddenly imploded and then blasted out, heating each and every limb, whiting out his brain, catching his breath. He held Steve's head in place as he came, ropes of cum shooting into the back of Steve's throat. He had managed to keep himself quiet--the only sign of him falling apart were sharp breaths of air and his thigh muscles twitching and quivering.

Tears fell freely from Steve's eyes when Billy bucked his hips up, but he simply tightened his grip around Billy's thigh. He groaned when Billy began to cum, pulled a little harder than usual at Steve's hair as he swallowed thickly around him. Steve kept moving his fingers, though he slowed down the speed and intensity as he opened his eyes and looked up at the blonde. Steve blinked away the tears in his eyes and thought Billy looked beautiful like that, sexy and relaxed, panting with a sheen of sweat on his body. It was strange and amazing to think that somehow Steve managed to do that to Billy.

Steve was still breathing harshly through his nose and held onto the now softening cock in his mouth. He could feel saliva around his lips and a little dripped onto his chin. His eyes were half-lidded as Steve kept his eyes trained on Billy. He removed his fingers first, carefully, since it wasn't that long since he remembered the same sensitivity.

Billy gently untangled his fingers from Steve's hair. He licked his lips and then smiled at the other boy, although it was slightly goofy, considering he felt a little high. He twitched as Steve's fingers pulled out of him, and even though he had unraveled and come, his muscles still trembled. He blew out a breath and then sat up.

"That was amazing, sweetheart," Billy reached down and cupped Steve's face. He pulled him up and leaned down at the same time so their lips could meet. He obviously didn't care about kissing after something like that. Maybe he should, but with Steve? He couldn't bring himself to care. He dipped his tongue over Steve's lower lip and stroked his thumbs over his cheeks.

Steve was shaking when he parted his lips with a whimpering moan, his jaw aching, but it was hard to care when Billy looked at him like that, touched him so tenderly. A few errant tears were wiped away and Billy could taste himself on Steve's tongue. He hungrily kissed

the blonde, leaning up further on the bed and against his body. Steve softly bit Billy's lip, caught it between his teeth before he released it, only to dive back in for another eager kiss.

He moved towards Billy, cradled his head in both hands as Steve knelt above him, careful not to seat himself in Billy's lap. Steve kissed him passionately, desperately took Billy's mouth with a groan. His own need burned strongly through him, and he pressed his pelvis against Billy's stomach needily. Steve didn't even give Billy a chance to respond really before he growled in frustration and quickly laid down on the bed, yanking Billy on top of him between his legs.

He didn't care about unzipping his pants or pulling himself out, as soon as Billy was actually on top of him, Steve wrapped his tightly legs around him and rolled his hips just like in the car. "Keep kissing me--I need you to fucking *kiss me--*" It was a cross between a whimper and a plea, on the verge of being too loud when Steve closed his eyes tightly, his face a little scrunched as if it was physical painful to hold back. It certainly felt like that for Steve. One hand tangled in Billy's hair at the nape of his neck while the other scrabbled on Billy's back.

Billy knew when Steve had pulled him on top of him that he needed to be touched, that his body was burning up. He could tell by the way his skin flushed and his eyes glazed over. Of course, he could also hear it in his voice. He took Steve by the jaw and pressed his mouth over his. He dipped his tongue into Steve's mouth, and with his free hand, he reached down and flicked his pants open. His fingers dug beneath his briefs and circled around his cock.

"Remember to be quiet, Steve," Billy teased against his lips. He continued to kiss him, exploring his mouth as his hand began to stroke Steve, squeezing at the bottom and swiping his finger over the slit at the top. He was covered in pre-cum, and *fuck*, Steve was hard. He moaned quietly into his mouth and tried not to let another wave of arousal hit him. The point was to get Steve off--not start another problem.

For the briefest of moments, Steve's lip curled irritably and he glared before he quietly snapped back in desperation, "Like you're *fucking* me, Hargrove--" He grimaced a little, immediately released Billy's

hair from his hand and brought his hand to his face before he bit down harshly, muffling a yell. Steve couldn't recall feeling this desperate and needy before, the buzzing of his body the only thing he could hear the closer he got.

Steve released Billy's back and reached up to harshly twist as the sheets above him, some part of him still aware that the sensations were getting too intense and he couldn't risk hurting Billy. Everything was so bright, so *bright* and the lights flickered quickly in the room as Steve bit down harder on his hand, quickly rolling his hips against Billy's as Steve chased his orgasm. Each second that brought him closer made the humming louder, impossibly loud, and he heard it so strongly throughout his whole body that he felt some tears leak from his eyes again.

Billy chuckled as Steve snapped. It was cute to him how desperate Steve could get. He squeezed his cock and continued to stroke. His thumb grazed the tip of his cock, spreading the liquid that gathered there, and then dropped back down. He slid his fingers over his balls, gently cupping them, massaging, before his hand moved back and began to run his hand up and down Steve's cock again.

"Come on, baby," Billy cooed, his lips quirking into a grin. "Let go for me, yeah?"

The lights didn't shatter but they flickered wildly as Steve's orgasm finally hit him. His eyes rolled back into his head and he bit down so hard, Steve could tell from the slight metallic tang that he actually broke the skin. He shook as hard as he came, muffling a scream on his hand as his tears ran past his temples into his hair.

Thick, hot spurts hit Billy's stomach, coated Billy's his hand, and landed on Steve's stomach and sweater, which rode up during their movements. Steve was still shaking when he released his hand, let it drop to the bed as he gasped out. His lower lip quivered and Steve wasn't sure how to feel for a moment. Blissed out, but shocked from the intensity of it, by his *need*, by being driven to such lengths just to stop hearing it as clearly as Steve heard somebody speaking to him.

Steve wasn't even aware of what he was doing when he whispered, "Stop it..." And it seemed for a moment that he was speaking to Billy,

maybe upset with Billy, when the blonde saw him spread his fingers, moved them in a half-circle, and all the lights turned off. Even the soft glow of the tree under the door was gone and the room was dark. Steve did his best to control the quaking of his body when he planted a soft kiss to Billy's jaw.

Billy paused as he watched Steve fall apart. He ignored the coiling in his gut, the want for more, and then blinked as Steve told him to stop it. He furrowed his brow, "Stop wha--" Then, Steve twisted his hand and the lights turned off. "Uhm. Steve?" He really shouldn't be surprised. He shouldn't be concerned. Hell, he could tear someone apart without touching him, but he had just watched Steve turn the lights off with a movement of his hand.

"Steve, babe, do you realize what you just did?" Billy shifted and grabbed a piece of clothing from the floor. He used it to mop up Steve's cum and then tossed it to the side. His head was buzzing as he settled down next to Steve again.

"Mmm?" Steve hummed and stared at the ceiling for a moment before he lazily turned his head to face Billy. Steve felt relaxed again, the buzzing slowly dying down to a pleasant hum as he gave Billy a soft smile. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap, I was a little worked up." He barely moved his body when he attempted to tug the sweater over his head.

He drew the blonde close to him, still smiling and unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Steve rubbed his hand up and down his side as he pressed their foreheads together. It was hard to describe how any of that felt to Billy, maybe he had his own version of it, but Billy always seemed to have more control than Steve. It overpowered him, made it hard to think, made everything feel so taut and alive--it was just amazing but also frightening.

"That's not what I'm talking about," Billy mused as he tucked an arm around Steve's waist. He thought about it for a moment. The movement was automatic, as if Steve knew what he was doing, but his brain didn't register it. It was like turning a light off but having to go back and check it because the person couldn't remember if they actually did it or not. He furrowed his brow and pressed a light kiss to Steve's cheek. He wasn't sure if he should push it, considering

Steve was finally relaxed.

Billy decided he would ask Steve about it in the morning after they both got some sleep. He didn't want to start any sort of conversation when they both had struggled, and were still struggling, to actually sleep. The day had gone well, so maybe that night would be easier.

Steve quirked up an eyebrow, "Are you sure?" He sat up for a moment and arched his hips to push off his jeans, kicking them onto the floor, before he settled back in Billy's arms. Steve had fleeting control of his abilities, was able to do small things like the lights or the radio earlier. Billy hadn't seen him in the lab or the tunnels, but that was the flipside of the coin. A minor thing versus melting through steel and concrete just to be able to get Billy out. Whatever Steve did that time he violently shocked Billy, that wasn't the extent of Steve's abilities. Billy was just a person, and natural phenomena happened all the time. People got struck by lightning. People didn't use it to break into a maximum security government facility.

Now that Billy was more used to his own powers, it was easy for him to *see* that it grew into this crescendo inside Steve, that was until he expelled it one way or another. It changed Steve's personality just a little, or rather forced some of the more extreme aspects of his personality to the forefront. Ultimately, until Steve had more control, it wasn't entirely clear what Steve could do. If it built up, he could lose it too, right? Steve could defend himself...until it was gone.

Steve softly kissed Billy's neck up to his jawline. "What's going on, where are you right now, Hargrove..."

Billy thought it was sort of endearing--the way Steve squirmed out of his pants. He tugged him close again and allowed himself to relax. At the question, he paused and looked down at Steve. He couldn't really see him, not with his eyes open, anyway. His energy signature was only there with his eyes closed. Maybe someday he'd be able to control that. He paused and pressed himself closer to Steve.

"It's nothing, Steve. Go to sleep, okay?" He ran his fingers through Steve's hair and scratched his nails along his scalp. "You deserve to rest. Shit's been insane." He pressed his lips to Steve's forehead and finally closed his eyes. The silver of Steve's energy was still glittering,

but it wasn't reaching like it normally did. He'd have to remember that doing *this* with Steve is what basically calmed him down (and whatever happened to be inside of him).

"You too, asshole, I fucking hoped to wear you out for once..." Steve kissed along his neck gently before he rested his arm around the blonde, his thumb stroking Billy's back slowly as he smiled against his neck. They often slept like this at Hopper's cabin, but after being together, really together, it felt strangely intimate and Steve wished he didn't feel so tired.

"I haven't forgotten that you owe me pie, you know." Steve murmured against his skin, settling into the bed and allowing himself to ease into sleep. He yawned once, maybe they could get the Camaro tomorrow, or at least see it soon. Steve knew it would make Billy happy.

He closed his eyes as he began to relax further and further against Billy's body. "This was the best Christmas..." Steve drowsily whispered, before he was out for good, and half sprawled against Billy.

Billy continued to stroke his fingers through Steve's hair. He was smiling as Steve rambled. That was normal, he found. Whenever Steve was really tired, he tended to mumble, even if it was nonsensical at times. He eased himself close to Steve and closed his eyes. The silver glitter should bother him. It should make it hard for him to fall asleep, but it did the opposite. He dropped off almost immediately, his arm secured around Steve's waist.